

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Conceptualising the ideal university student

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Abstract: This paper contributes to our understanding of the ‘ideal’ university student – a working concept that promotes a more transparent conversation about the explicit, implicit and idealistic expectations of students in higher education. Drawing on Weber’s theory of ideal types, we explore university staff and students’ conceptualisation of the ‘ideal’ student. Informed by 20 focus groups with 75 university staff and students, we focus on how the ‘ideal’ student is perceived, challenged and negotiated. We argue that the ‘ideal’ university student has important conceptual and practical implications for higher education, especially the importance of explicitness and the dangers of presumptions. The concept has the potential to bridge differences and manage expectations between lecturers and students, which has been stretched due to consumerism, by offering a platform where expectations of university students are elaborated. We present a working definition of ‘ideal’ university student, which, we argue, encompasses desirability, imperfection and realism.

Paper: In everyday language, the word ideal is often used to describe dreams and aspirations, such as the ideal house, holiday, job and car. Most people will have some ideas or imaginations about such ideals. These ideals, riddled with expectations, can also be applied to social roles and positions, for example the ideal citizen, man, woman, partner, teacher and – the focus of this paper – student. This paper aims to further develop the concept of ‘ideal’ in the context of university students and promote a more transparent conversation about the explicit, implicit and idealistic expectations of students by university staff and students themselves. As the global higher education sector moves towards a marketisation that promote consumer rights and student demands, it is crucial that expectations of university students are clearly communicated between educators and learners, to avoid discrepancies of expectations that can negatively contribute to student experiences and outcomes.

This paper interrogates how the concept of ‘ideal’ university student is understood, interpreted and recognised, as well as challenged and negotiated by university staff and students. In doing so, expectations of students are made more explicit, which is important for openness and equality. This

paper contributes to the theoretical development of the 'ideal' university student as we draw on empirical data to discuss the concerns and challenges of the concept as well as the potentials to promote more explicit discussions about expectations of university students. We present a working definition of 'ideal' university student, which, we argue, encompasses desirability, imperfection and realism.

We draw on Max Weber's (2009) theory of ideal types, which is understood as the mental constructs that we develop to make sense of and comparisons with reality. Weber argued that ideal types are imperative in the functioning and stability of societies because individual members of society can associate their own views and experiences with these ideals, as a point of reference, to further construct, develop and negotiate their social understanding and interactions. For example, ideal types can help us to appreciate and comprehend the roles of schools and teachers, which are constructed and developed over time through lived experiences and reflections, as well as through different ideas, expectations and anticipations about their roles and responsibilities. As such, ideal types can support the functioning of societal normality by being part of the socialisation process that provides us with the dispositions to interpret, react and respond to the complexities of everyday life occurrences (Stemplowska 2008).

Conversely, implicit and occluded expectations of students have long disadvantaged those who struggled to understand or 'play' the higher education game, especially students from non-traditional backgrounds (e.g., Bathmaker et al. 2016; Crozier et al. 2008; Wong 2018). These studies, among many others, have explored inequalities of gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity, as well as issues of withdrawal, transition into university and students' identity struggles in 'becoming' a university student (e.g., Cotton, Joyner, George, and Cotton 2016; Crozier, Burke, and Archer 2016; Tinto 1993; Willcoxson, Cotter, and Joy 2011). As students' own social background can generate specific experiences, challenges and opportunities, we believe that the concept of ideal can provide students, especially those less familiar with higher education discourses, a better and clearer understanding of what is valued and expected at university. The concept of 'ideal' university student can potentially reduce the uncertainty that some students may have about what lecturers expect from them, as such unfamiliarity can contribute or exacerbate existing social inequality (e.g., the hidden curriculum).

Drawing on data from 20 focus groups with 75 university staff and students, we focus on staff and students' interpretations of the concept, including the potential problems and possibilities as we refine our understanding of the 'ideal' university student. Our data analysis is informed by a social constructionist perspective which recognises social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr 2003). While our aim is not to generalise, our participants came from five universities across three English regions (London, South East and Yorkshire and the Humber), including both pre and post-92 institutions, from the broad disciplines of the applied science, arts & humanities, natural science and social science. Potential participants were identified through convenient and snowball sampling, by email invitations, and attempts were made to recruit participants for each focus group by their broad discipline, to promote data on disciplinary viewpoints. We conducted at least four focus groups with participants from each of the four broad disciplines mentioned above. All focus groups (FGs) began with the question, *what do you think about the term 'ideal' student?* and a range of responses were articulated from deliberations of the concept itself to discussions of desirable student characteristics and identities. In this study, we focus on staff and students' views on the concept of 'ideal'. Discussions of the concept of 'ideal' university

student has not only provoked curiosity and cynicism, but also offered insights into its potential value for theory and practice. Our data analysis is informed by a social constructionist perspective which recognises social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced. Further details of the methodology are presented in the full paper.

This paper argues that the concept of 'ideal' university student provides a platform for expectations of students to be shared, discussed and negotiated. Being ideal is not the same as being perfect, in the sense of flawlessness, as being an ideal student can also mean future improvements or progress. For students, this concept offers an indication of the type of student characteristics that are valued by tutors and an opportunity to self-develop, negotiate and embody these attributes, if realistic and desirable. For staff, the 'ideal' university student promotes self-reflection of the student features that are most appreciated, recognised or even rewarded. The concept of 'ideal' university student aims to promote transparency and explicitness about the desirable characteristics in a student, so that students, especially from non-traditional backgrounds, are not disadvantaged due to their unfamiliarity and inability to 'play the higher education game' (Bathmaker et al. 2016).

Our working definition thus far is underpinned by the keywords of desirability, imperfection and realism. We argue that the 'ideal' university student constitutes the desirable but realistic expectations of students in higher education; ideal is not about perfection, nor being the highest or the best. Further research is currently underway to explore how this concept operates at the individual and collective level, especially between staff and students, and across disciplines and institutions. With a greater understanding of the 'ideal' university student, differences in expectations of students can be appropriately addressed, but until an honest conversation takes place about our respective 'ideal' university students, we are wary of the missed opportunities to maximise the impact of the support that universities already provide students.