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Title Is there an 'ideal' student at university?

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The rising cost of university, especially for English students, has propelled student consumerism deeper into the higher education discourse. In response, universities and lecturers have explored different ways to promote and improve student experiences, such as student-centred pedagogies and personalised learning, as well as additional support around academic skills and writing (Lindsay, 2011; Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010; Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2014). Higher education research has focused on students and what universities and staff can do to support students. Lesser is known of the views of university staff amid these changes, beyond their reflections around teaching practices or excellences (Wood & Su, 2017; Uiboleht, Karm, & Postareff, 2016).

In this paper, we present an empirical study which explored the ways in which lecturers conceptualise the 'ideal' university student, through 30 in-depth interviews (18 women and 12 men) with social science lecturers from two post-92 universities in England. By 'ideal' student, we do not mean being 'perfect' or the best. Weber (2009) considered 'ideal' types as a useful tool to collect and collate conceptual ideas, which represents 'an abstract or hypothetical optimum' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2010). As such, the 'ideal' student is not meant to be a direct reflection of specific individuals with particular attributes. Rather, it constitutes a collective recognition of the range of features that we might find across a spectrum of students.

Recent studies around the 'ideal' student are mostly conducted in the context of early years and compulsory education (Bradbury, 2013; Harkness et al., 2007; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2009; Maslovaty, Cohen & Furman, 2008), or from the perspectives of university students (Leathwood, 2006; Leathwood & Read, 2009; Skelton, 2012). In the context of Denmark (Tange & Jensen, 2012) and Canada (Vinther & Slethaug, 2014), lecturers were found to conceive the 'ideal' student as self-driven, reflective and proactive individuals who will voice up their opinions or even challenge the tutor's viewpoints. International students, on the other hand, are often considered as passive, obedient and lacking critical viewpoints in seminars and supervisions. Of course, these characteristics can also be found in home students and may be patterned by wider structural variables (Leathwood, 2006).

Our participants are staff teaching in the broad discipline of the social sciences, whose views about the 'ideal' student remain relatively underexplored. University lecturers were purposefully invited to participate through email invitations and we recruited staff with a range of teaching experiences and backgrounds. Collectively, our lecturers are involved in over ten different programmes, mostly in undergraduate degrees, with some in postgraduate teaching and supervision. As an indication, the staff taught across social science subjects including criminology, economics, education, international relations, policies and sociology.

We are aware that the concept of the 'ideal' student can be contentious. One lecturer, Courtney, reminded us that 'research would give you a profile, but reality doesn't always match that ... [an 'ideal'] student in one context isn't necessarily in another'. As such, we pay specific attention to the different teaching and learning contexts, namely lecture, seminar and individual supervision. We do not expect a single vision or a universally accepted set of attributes around the 'ideal' university student, but it is evident that social science staff have particular expectations of student that will enhance our understanding of lecturers' construction of the 'ideal' university student. As discussed, these expectations can broadly be grouped into personal and academic skillsets.

There is a consensus among our lecturers that students would ideally be prepared, engaged, committed and in some cases, going the extra mile. These features were mentioned (although not always collectively) by staff in their descriptions of the 'ideal' student, even though for some, these were also their minimum expectations of university students. As such, these personal attributes appear to be, at the very least, the basis of an 'ideal' university student in the social sciences, and

perhaps more generally. Lecturers were keen to stress that in an ideal world, students would have made the appropriate preparation before their scheduled teaching, whether it is a lecture, seminar or individual supervision. From our interview data, it is apparent that staff value the importance of reading as students make preparation for their studies. Every staff noted the desire for their students to have read something in preparation for a teaching session.

Our lecturers also acknowledge that possession of particular academic skills are desirable for students who wish to embark on a successful university journey, even though academic grade itself is not necessarily an integral feature of an 'ideal' university student. A number of lecturers have identified academic writing, or the lack of it, to be critical in students' success. Our lecturers have emphasised the importance of critical thinking and being reflective. In the social sciences, it is perhaps unsurprising to learn that the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct information and arguments are valued and expected of undergraduate students. The ability to reflect is also important for students, especially their capacity to review their previous work and accept areas for improvement as suggested by tutors.

Going forward, our study has identified particular personal and academic skillsets that are valued by social science lecturers, and these expectations increase as students' progress in their undergraduate study. With regards to personal attributes, our study suggests that the current policy emphasis on 'character education' (Harrison, Bawden & Rogerson, 2016) could extend its focus into higher education, beyond the target of aged five to sixteen schoolchildren.

In sum, an 'ideal' university student, as far as our social science lecturers are concerned, encompasses those who are prepared, engaged and committed, as well as being progressive, critical and reflective. We believe it is important for students, as well as university staff and policymakers, to acknowledge and recognise the different expectations that lecturers have of students so that detrimental mismatches of expectations can be bridged and addressed. It would be useful to attest the extent to which these attributes are shared, or not, by lecturers across different disciplines as well as other types of higher education institutions.