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'It's for others to judge': what influences students' construction of the ideal student?

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ABSTRACT

Recognising the changing landscape and financial costs, changes in the higher education sector continue to challenge the purpose and operations of universities, notably the shift towards student consumerism. Given this, what it means to be a student in contemporary higher education can evolve and would arguably have implications about the expectations of university students and staff for learning and teaching practice. To promote greater transparency of expectations, this paper develops the concept of the ideal student further with closer look into the spheres of influence that shape university students' construction of the ideal student. We draw on 23 focus groups with 105 university students to explore the key factors that contribute to how the ideal student is developed and recognised. Our findings indicate that students' construction of the ideal student is closely shaped by and rooted in their prior educational experiences, interaction with their peers and the curriculum, and perceptions of lecturers, institution and employer expectations. All these influences lead to a fluid and complex negotiation process as students navigate the meanings of being a university student. We conclude with practical implications for learning, teaching and curriculum development in higher education. The paper therefore provides a platform for key stakeholders to discuss different influencing factors as we support student transition and progression and manage their expectations of higher education.

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Introduction

Within the higher education market, students are increasingly perceived and positioned as consumers who can expect and demand more out of their education. There are growing concerns that students place a greater emphasis on their grades, leading to a pragmatic approach to their learning (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009), which may not always fit well with the holistic aims of higher education (see Lingard 2014; Sellar 2013). We argue it is important to ensure that expectations of what it means to a university student are clearly communicated in order to mitigate the potential negative impact on student learning experience which often rests on unspoken assumptions about the desirable attributes of a university student.

In our earlier work, we explored the *ideal student* as a concept to promote transparent conversations about the explicit, implicit and idealistic expectations of students by university staff and students. We proposed a working definition that highlights the importance of desirability, imperfection and realism (Wong and Chiu 2021a). This paper aims to further develop the ideal student concept by exploring how different spheres of influence can contribute to students' perceptions,

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construction and negotiation of the ideal student. Specifically, we highlight the influences of students' prior educational experience, demands of the subject and curriculum, perceptions of lecturer expectations, institutional context, and societal and employer expectations, contributing to our understanding of how these domains might enable and constrain students' construction of what it means to be a university student. We conclude by considering the implications for practice and educational policy.

Being a student in higher education

Research on university students' views and attitudes has tended to focus on their learning experiences, such as technology-enhanced learning (e.g. Kennedy and Dunn 2018; Khan and Khan 2019; Pechenkina and Aeschliman 2017), student engagement (e.g. Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb 2001; Oldfield et al. 2019) and academic or pastoral support (e.g. Cahill, Bowyer, and Murray 2014; Nagraj et al. 2019). Less attention is focused on understanding how students negotiate and interpret their role as a student in higher education (Brooks and O'Shea 2021). Here, we aim to further develop the concept of the *ideal student*. Whilst there are conceptual challenges, with multiple interpretations and constructions of ideals, the concept provides a space for desirable and ideal expectations of students to be openly shared and discussed (Wong and Chiu 2021a). More importantly, constructions of the ideal student can vary between stakeholders and are likely to be shaped and influenced by a range of factors.

Thinyane (2013), for example, explored staff perceptions of the ideal computer science student in South Africa and found skills such as creativity and problem solving as fundamental in their ideal student. In England, social science lecturers have identified being critical, reflective and progressing as key attributes in an ideal student (Wong and Chiu 2020). According to students in Spain, the ideal student is active and passionate about learning as well as being academically capable, motivated and intrigued (Llamas 2006), whilst undergraduates in England noted independence to be a pivotal characteristic for students in higher education (Leathwood 2006). In Denmark, staff envisioned the ideal physics undergraduates to be interested, committed, modest and clever (Ulriksen 2009). Ulriksen developed the concept of the *implied student* to foreground the relational and contextual expectations of students. Here, the curriculum, the disciplinary and institutional culture would all construct a certain learning structure or condition which offers 'a set of frames for what is possible if the practice should still be considered as a legitimate and comprehensible way of engaging with the study' (Ulriksen 2009, 522). It can be inferred that students' construction of what it means to be a university student is more or less driven or constrained by the perceived situated expectations and assumptions, be it implicit or explicit and hence generate implied action or identity.

It is often believed that academic communities offer a range of student identities that are available or desirable for students to adapt and develop, such as being a *good* student or a student who is not afraid of asking for help (Wong and Chiu 2019). Since the rise in tuition fees in England from 2012, a 'pragmatic identity' appears to have emerged where some 'students [view] their studies as a means to the end of a future profession' (Thunborg, Bron, and Edström 2012, 32; see also Tomlinson 2016). Much of this phenomenon appears to be associated with students' high level of extrinsic motivation/external rewards such as obtaining good grades and future prospects, as opposed to a more intrinsic desire for mastering the subject matter. The former might have detrimental effects on student development of deep and conceptual learning process if it is excessive (Bunce, Baird, and Jones 2017; Haywood, Nixon, and Scullion 2019; Simons, Dewitte, and Lens 2004). Indeed, Barnett (2007) cautioned that a student's *will to learn* is rarely questioned in the literature as it is often assumed by their enrolment and presence at university. Whilst the *will to learn* can be gained or lost, students in higher education ought to take responsibility for their own learning, which includes developing the qualities of being diligent, respectful, resilient, self-disciplined, open and persistent. Barnett suggested that 'a will to learn; a will to engage;

a preparedness to listen; a preparedness to explore; a willingness to hold oneself open to experiences; a determination to keep going forward' (Barnett 2007, 102) are dispositions that university students ought to develop, along with self-belief.

In this paper, we see the construction of student identity, such as the ideal student in higher education, to be a constant negotiation of self and meaning-making process (Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen 2014). Students carry their prior educational experience as they enter and socialise into a new academic discourse community and such transition could be smooth or turbulent with tensions or ambivalence. Also, Wenger (1998) stated that 'we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves' (149). Specifically, in addition to how we see ourselves, the identity formation and sustainability is also influenced by the participation of others, such as how others might see us, implying the importance of the 'recognition by others' for the development of the sense of self (Carlone and Webb 2006; Gee 2000). The construction of identity, therefore, can also be manifested by being recognised as a certain 'kind of person' by others (Gee 2000, 99). Being seen as an ideal student in higher education, for example, can influence the ways in which a student thinks about themselves. We argue that university students are self-aware, allowing them to form particular student identities through their interactions and experiences with their learning community and people around them. The interplay between students themselves as agency and structure such as curriculum and institutional context can be dynamic and complex.

The study

This paper reports from a two-year study that aims to develop the concept of the ideal student in higher education, with a focus on the views of students and the different factors that appear to shape their constructions of ideal university student characteristics. Data were collected between 2017 and 2019 and we draw on 23 focus group discussions with 105 university students from the four broad disciplines of the applied sciences, arts and humanities, natural sciences and social sciences (see Table A1 for details). Our student participants were recruited from five universities across three English regions (London, South East and Yorkshire and the Humber), including both pre-92 and post-92 institutions.[1] The full project also included 10 focus groups with 27 staff (which we report elsewhere, see Wong and Chiu 2021a, 2021b), but these are excluded given the focus of this paper is on students.

The focus group method was utilised as we wanted students to discuss and debate their similar and different expectations and ideals of university students (Krueger and Casey 2014). 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. Almost all focus groups comprised of students from the same degree programme or department. Most students were undergraduates (n = 92), with masters and doctoral students (n = 13) taking part in three focus groups. We conducted at least four focus groups with participants from each of the four broad disciplines mentioned above. In total, we recruited more females (n = 63) than males (n = 42). Over a third of participants self-identified as White, White British or White European (n = 37), with a wide range of other ethnicities also mentioned, including multiple/mixed backgrounds (n = 13), Asian (n = 23), Black (n = 11) and Chinese (n = 21) ethnicities (see Wong and Chiu 2021b for more details). Each focus group lasted an hour on average and was audio-recorded, with the data transcribed verbatim and personal details anonymised (see Appendix). Our students were asked to talk about their views and opinions around the notion of the ideal student, including their ideas and constructions of ideal student characteristics. All focus groups 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 (see Wong and Chiu 2021a). In this paper, we focus on

the different factors that appear to be prominent and seem to influence students' constructions of the ideal student.

Data analysis is informed by a social constructionist perspective which recognises social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr 2003). In other words, meaning and knowledge are constructed and created through interaction and negotiation (Savin-Baden and Howell-Major 2013) by which we view students' constructions of the ideal student as being influenced by their specific social and institutional contexts. Focus group data were managed and organised using *NVivo* software. Initial codes were created through the identification of relevant themes that emerged in the initial stages of data analysis as we moved 'back and forth' between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes were refined or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin and Strauss 2014). We established an initial coding framework after the authors coded the same data independently by relevant themes, which was then discussed and compared, with any differences on the application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. The coding process involved gathering a range of views and expectations of the ideal student, especially when students referred to the different influencing factors that may have shaped their construction of ideal student characteristics. For example, some of the key themes were labelled as *institutional contexts, subject curriculum, prior educational experiences, and lecturer* and *societal expectations*. Matrix coding query in *NVivo* was also applied to our coded data to explore the patterns by different demographic groups (e.g. institution types) and key themes that might have contributed to students' construction of the ideal student. Noting some of these patterns allowed us to better interpret and understand the key spheres of influence in relation to their institutional contexts.

Spheres of influence on students' construction of the ideal student

Our analysis suggests that students' construction of the ideal student is very much dependent on their perspectives as many stated that 'different people come to university for different things . . . so I think it's really personal' (Jamal, FG29) and it 'depends on the person, it is very individual for what is an ideal student' (Jean, FG7). These views are expected as students enter university alongside their background, prior knowledge and educational experience, which could shape their perceptions of what it means to be a university student. What deserves our attention is when students discussed their perceptions of the ideal student, they made frequent and persistent reference to particular spheres of influence, as discussed below.

Students' prior cultural and educational experiences

For some students, their prior educational experience and cultural expectations are likely to have shaped their own conceptions of the ideal student. Aaron (FG21), for instance, described his learning experiences in Singapore and Thailand where the culture of former seems to 'focus more on grades' while the latter appears to place more emphasis on 'hard work'. Likewise, students expressed that different education systems would yield different priorities and emphases, as Doris (FG20) explains:

> I feel like with Chinese or Singaporean people there's a lot more focus on academics and grades which I think is just a product of a school system which values that a lot more, whereas I feel like some European school systems . . . people who have come from those value general university experience a bit more.

Here, students' perceptions of the ideal student are at least partially shaped by their prior educational and societal expectations. Relatedly, some minority ethnic students, such as Maha (FG4), also talked about the pressure from their parents to be academically successful and work 'towards achieving certain goals' (see also Wong 2015). She believed that being an ideal student 'does depend on how you are brought up, and the culture'. That said, students' construction of the ideal student is

not fixed or static and can certainly be developed as they experience and encounter different education systems:

> [For me] in Asian education you're used to just being spoon fed like you know how to memorise information. That's what you've been used to for 12 years in your life. But I think Western education is based on exploration, you're given more opportunities to widen your horizon on any topic you like. (Alisha, FG24)

Alisha's reflection and comparison between Asian/Eastern and European/Western education reveal the ongoing development and negotiation of what it means to be a university student for those with transnational educational experiences (Watkins 2000). As an Asian international student who only experienced UK education when she started university, HangMoon (FG26) said she realised that getting good grades is not the only valuable or desirable outcome; instead, being creative is also highly regarded, which she believes should 'form a huge part of an ideal student'. Her experiences are not uncommon for international students, especially those from the East, who are likely to have been socialised with a different philosophy of education, teaching and learning (Chang et al. 2011), which might inform a different range of desirable student characteristics. Indeed, international students often need to learn and negotiate the cultures of their host country, some of which may even come as a shock or surprise when compared to their own norms and values (Brown and Holloway 2008; Durkin 2008; Zhou et al. 2008).

Overall, there is a sense that what it means to be an ideal student can be contingent on students' pre-university life experience, at least initially. However, most students are open to engage with different ideas of the ideal student, especially from the influence of their degree, lecturers and wider institutional or societal expectations.

Structure and demands of the subject curriculum

Students' perceptions of the ideal student can be shaped by the structure of their degree discipline and curriculum. For instance, some students from the natural sciences consider the ideal student to be highly independent and motivated to study beyond what is taught in lectures. These students suggest that their curriculum is structured in a way that allows them to 'have full flexibility to manage [their] time . . . and not [to be] restricted to nine to five like any other courses' (Lindsay, FG25). Here, students appreciate the freedom of study time, which seems to help and support their development of time management skills and to 'find the [work-life] balance' (Gola, FG25) – a key characteristic in their discipline-specific ideal student.

Other students reported a different learning experience that also highlights the role of the subject curriculum. As one engineering student commented on his roommates who study physics:

> I live with three physicists, and they were talking . . . last year they had like [assessment] deadline after deadline . . . I think it's like second week of spring or something like that where they were just worked to the bone to make sure they got all these things out. And the fact that they're expected to do that and it nearly drove them up the wall because there was so much of it. (Alex, FG27)

Here, the physical, emotional and intellectual demands of their degree course seem to have limited the opportunities for students to explore or develop their other interests. The design of the curriculum can influence and impact on how students perceive and identify with the ideal student, especially in the context of their discipline. For example, natural science students are generally perceived to be more focused on their comprehensions of key principles, whilst applied science students are typically expected to display more interest in the application of knowledge to solve problems. Kyle (FG26), for instance, said that the ideal engineering student would be expected to apply their learning 'to solve real-life problems'.

For other students, the ideal student is viewed and constructed with considerations of the professional identity related to the discipline. Guy (FG3) studied sports journalism and for him:

> The ideal student is for us to go and try to make contact and work with people and find out what it's actually like in the real world … so that would be our bread and butter, where a sports student, theirs would be to train hard … and put in good performances.

Here, we can appreciate that identifications with the ideal student may also include considerations of what professionals associated with their subject discipline are typically expected to embody.

Lecturer expectations

In recognition of the influence of others, students' identification and construction of the ideal student are also associated with what they think lecturers expect of them. According to Xin (FG13), 'what is ideal shifts according to who we're being taught. You're like morphing into different images of an ideal student'. Whilst students believe there are characteristics of the ideal student that are likely to be universally shared, such as being passionate, motivated and engaged in their study, that does not mean there would not be particular expectations of students from specific staff. For example, Elon (FG23) expressed that 'I sometimes get two lecturers saying completely different things' such as the feedback on a written work that is praised by one tutor but criticised by another. Likewise, Shelia (FG29) also stated:

> Two of our lecturers, one of them likes when you ask questions and speak and discuss the things, whereas the other one is always like, no talking. So, you could be ideal for one [lecturer] and be a crap student for the other one.

In terms of the academic performance, a small number of students suspected that some lecturers are only interested in their grades and outcomes ('just pass your exams, do well, go study', Jamal, FG29). However, most other students reckoned that staff are more concerned about their efforts. At the individual level, certain student characteristics may be more desirable amongst particular tutors, which means it can be difficult for students to identify as an ideal student in the same way for different lecturers, especially if lecturers have different or even contradictory expectations.

Institutional context

For most pre-92 university students, the ideal student is someone who can attain high grades as well as have 'balance between social activities and academics' (Kelly, FG32). As Antoinette (FG28) also elaborated:

> …being obviously keeping up with your studies, you need to have that balance. So you need to do your sport, but you also need to maintain a good quality of life at home as well. So sort of cooking, eating well, making sure you're in a good living space, like just expanding it out a little bit beyond academia basically.

This account signifies the attribute of striking a balance between one's academic studies, and social life and wellbeing in an ideal student. However, many students also considered this as an 'idealistic thing' (Doris, FG20) which is challenging to achieve, especially with the competitive nature of their institutional culture where getting good grades seems to be interpreted as a norm or even minimal expectation:

> I felt like since coming here, is that's kind of, [having a 2:1] is not anything special, it's just like kind of the requirement to have good grades. And then on top of that you have to be doing things because everyone kind of has good grades anyway, so it's not really like oh if you graduate from [this university] and you have a 2:1 then you're like set for life. The grade is just, like that's like, you do that because that's just part of the basic. (Nasreen, FG20)

Nasreen's reference to the institution implies that the institutional context would carry specific expectations and requirements. Here, academic excellence is widely perceived as 'part of the basic', particularly by those in elite universities. The ideal student would therefore entail going

beyond just academic study but to also engage in extracurricular activities such as societies, clubs and internships. These expectations appear to be shared and reinforced by many other students. As Alvin (FG29) said:

> It's kind of common knowledge that, yes, everyone did well before they came here … everyone was used to being a high-achiever before, and because you have such a high concentration of people who are high-achievers, then obviously, even the standard of just good, goes up a lot higher.

Indeed, many felt that their perceptions of the ideal student depend on 'people [they] associate with' (Sang, FG24). Thus, despite recognition of institutional expectations, some students argued that academic grade is not necessarily a critical feature in an ideal student because 'you're here to learn so if I'm having bad grades, it's fine as well because I'm learning from it' (Nivaan, FG23). The importance of the learning process appears more prominent amongst post-92 university students. For instance, Roberto (FG4) stated:

> I think it's a combination of things. I wouldn't say that the ideal student gets top grades always because part of being an ideal student would be learning from your mistakes … I think knowing where you've gone wrong is a great place to be able to strive for the best.

For students such as Roberto, it is ideal for students to be able to improve and learn from mistakes. Generally, post-92 university students made fewer references to institutional expectations when discussing their ideal student, with the focus instead on personal traits such as commitment and responsibility. Yet, many felt these characteristics are personally difficult to embody due to their caring/job responsibilities, which have limited their dedications to study ('not really be able to focus', Anna, FG6). Consequently, the ideal student is also considered to be those 'who don't have responsibilities or family to look after, or jobs to be concerned with. It's someone who can only concentrate on university' (Muna, FG5). With competing demands, the importance of balance is critical, although not necessarily between academic and social activities, but more about managing the demands of personal as well as academic life. However, this kind of narrative is less common for pre-92 students, which suggests a relative privilege in terms of fewer external concerns. Whilst an ideal student for a pre-92 student may demand going the extra mile, for post-92 students, 'an ideal student would be happy enough just concentrating on the coursework and the actual course itself' (Guy, FG3). In short, students' constructions of the ideal student can be influenced by the context or culture of their institutions.

Societal and employer expectations

Lastly, the ideal student has also been discussed in relation to the terms the ideal worker or the ideal employee, with recognitions of external influences and the importance to adhere or conform to established practices and values. According to Grace (FG5):

> The idea of ideal student is connected to the idea of ideal worker. In the job market, you are requested to be ideal for the role, and it doesn't matter if you're different from me. You must be what they [employers] want you to be … I feel that like, be the ideal student is like the training to become the ideal worker, in a sense.

Here, the ideal student is interpreted as preparation to be an ideal candidate for employment, which means, as Meggie (FG30) summarises, 'the ideal student is also someone who's attractive to employers'. In other words, what students consider as an ideal student can also be premised on what they think society and employers expect of them. According to Shirley (FG20), academic credential is one of the quickest and easiest ways to filter down job applicants, and is therefore a key marker of an ideal candidate:

> What we view as ideal [is] … a result of societies' expectations in a way. Because um, how society is structured is that it recognises grades, like for graduates, one thing that they really look at after you graduate, whether it's for study or for employment, is grades first.

Indeed, some graduate employers, especially in so-called 'fast-track' schemes, only applicants with a first-class or 2:1 degree are considered. For other employers, the value of degree outcome may be less critical, as the importance of work experience or knowledge of technical/specific skills are also key considerations. In any case, Shirley's account has highlighted how students' perceptions of external expectations can also shape their views of the ideal student.

Self-identification as an ideal student: an ambivalent position?

When asked about their own identifications with the ideal student, most students were reluctant as they linked the ideal student to the idea of 'perfection' where 'it's difficult to be perfect in every aspect' (Maha, FG4). Here, students seem to interpret ideal as being perfect or the best and 'you've got to stay at the top … to maintain being an ideal student' (Holly, FG1). More importantly, our students also spoke of the challenges to associate and identify with the ideal student as it seems to require recognitions and acknowledgements by the self and by others as intelligible. For instance, Doris (FG20) explains that 'classifying yourself as [an ideal] student demands always some comparison and it really like, how I classify myself … really depends to what group of people I'm comparing myself'. Such comparisons have also raised concerns over mental wellbeing and excessive competition: 'it's competition I guess, it can be negative cause it can be mentally [and] emotionally exhausting to compare yourself to other people constantly' (Alisha, FG24).

Students also felt that the ideal student identity is not really a self-proclaimed identity because 'no one wants to claim that [they are] perfect' (Finlay, FG1) or sound 'big-headed [and] over-confident' (Owen, FG1). Here, students believe 'it's for others to judge if me is [an ideal] student or not, according to their parameters' (Olympia, FG33). In other words, the ideal student identity seems to be a label applied by others rather than self-acclaimed, which suggests that students' construction of the ideal student can be shaped by what they think are valued by others, such as their institutions, potential employers, lecturers and even peers. Yet, these perceived expectations from external drivers might not always align with students' perspectives, yielding a potential ambivalent position as they negotiate the challenge of striking a balance between their desire to adhere to their intrinsic motivation and intention, whilst acknowledging the external values and expectations. According to Guy (FG3):

> I'm not an ideal student … an ideal student would be totally 100% committed and would be nailed and focused on just the course … Whereas, I've come to university for primarily the course, but also the social life, going out and having a few drinks and turning up to a couple lectures hungover and maybe not engaging as much as I should have in those. But that's the experience that I wanted … it might harm my grade in the end but I'm happy enough with a good solid grade, not top-top.

Here, Guy did not see himself as an ideal student because such identity, he felt, would contradict his desire to embrace, experience and enjoy the student social life, even if such engagements can impact his grades. Similarly, others were also determined to focus on their own motivation and expectations, rather than to be influenced by the expectations of others ('it's more about my own expectations, what I want to get out from my degree, what I feel okay with … it's more doing myself justice', Gola, FG25). Whilst the significance of academic outcome was played down by some students, there are still external pressures that can engender tensions and ambivalences as students navigate what it means to be a university student, especially the ideal student.

Some students appear to prioritise the values and expectations of external agents (or recognitions by others). In highly competitive learning environments (especially in some pre-92 universities), students such as Shirley (see earlier) suggested that a kind of pragmatic learning identity may be manifested to reflect the ways in which the wider society is typically structured to value academic grades. She elaborated that such a pragmatic and strategic approach might not be the best way to develop deep and sustainable learning, and probably 'not something you should be aiming for', but

conceded 'that's how you get a first [class degree]'. The emphasis on how individuals or students should respond and react to what society appears to value and reward would certainly resonate with the importance of being recognised by others in the development of a sustainable identity (Gee 2000; Wenger 1998), which thrives from external validations of our sense of self, such as being a high-achiever.

Discussion and pedagogical implications

We explored the spheres of influence that shed light into students' identification and meaning-making process as they construct the ideal student. Specifically, we highlighted that students' prior educational experiences, lecturer expectations, curriculum, the university and wider society can shape what it means to be, and what is ideally expected of, students in higher education, be it implicit or explicit. Given the exploratory nature of our study, we acknowledge that these factors are by no means exhaustive nor prescriptive. However, these important insights provide us with a lens to understand how students construct and negotiate what it means to be a student in higher education. Below we discuss the key influences and their pedagogical implications.

Students from some universities (notably pre-92) considered the cultures of their institutions in their discussions of the ideal student, especially the competitive learning environment. Here, students felt that high grades and standards were considered normal, or even the minimal expectation. This perceived expectation of attainment has resulted in many students prioritising academic outcome, rather than the all-rounded individual that students also seem to value and desired. Given most of our pre-92 university students were high achievers in school, they may have already embodied an 'implied identity' (Ulriksen 2009) as high achievers and want to continue to maintain this student identity. With a high concentration of 'people like me', students are more likely to adopt a pragmatic identity that foregrounds mainly extrinsic rewards such as grades which could potentially diminish the learning process or personal development.

The importance of external recognition (Gee 2000, 2001), even if it is students' own perceptions of what they think others expect of them, is clearly significant in understanding how students develop and maintain their identities in higher education. As noted earlier, for many of our students, good grades are generally considered to be recognised by society and employers as the marker of success and competence and thereby it is plausible for students to be strategic in their pursuit of top grades as the way to evidence their abilities. While some students resisted the perceived value of the academic outcome, there continues to be external pressure such as frequent comparison and competitiveness that might still come into play as students negotiate what it means to be a university student, particularly for those in elite universities. We wonder how staff and universities can support students to think about what an ideal student might mean to them and work towards their own perceptions of the ideal student. For students who possess a strong pragmatic identity (e.g. focusing mainly on grades), it is useful for staff to consider how to empower students to see the holistic aims of higher education, such as the importance of transferable and higher-order skills development.

Firstly, we believe there is a need to support students to view the ideal student as being reflective and making progress rather than being perfect or the best, especially in terms of academic performance. That is, the learning process should be given greater attention to foster students' intrinsic motives for higher education. Given that students' prior experiences tend to also feed into their construction of the ideal student (e.g. Alisha and HangMoon), it is important staff can initiate open conversations and discussions with students on what it means to be a university student and what is expected of students within a particular learning context to address potential mismatches between staff and student expectations. This can be facilitated as part of student induction, at the early stage of the university journey or as students progress to the next academic year to support their transition and progression. For instance, in an induction session, students can be prompted to share their thoughts on what attributes are important in a university student before staff input. We

consider this sequence to be more inclusive as we encourage students to reflect, elaborate and negotiate their ideas based on their existing perceptions. Students' responses can be collected using an online anonymous poll that displays the keywords in a live word cloud (e.g. *Mentimeter*) to enhance participation. Staff can share and discuss with students the characteristics that are commonly valued by lecturers and provide resources and support for those who wish to develop these qualities (Wong, DeWitt, and Chiu 2021).

In terms of the influence of lecturers, students undergo different experiences throughout their degree, including their attempts to meet the expectations of different modules/courses and tutors. With this in mind, we are conscious that students' ideas about what it means to be a university student, including specific attributes that may be valued by particular tutors or modules, may shift over time and result in contradictory views and expectations (e.g. Elon and Shelia). As different subjects may have their own requirements and priorities, there is value in providing students with regular opportunities to communicate and reflect on their thoughts about learning and what is expected of them as they progress. Where needed, staff can clarify these expectations, especially for students with different views to their tutors.

Our approach to having conversations with students about what is valued, expected and rewarded at university can promote greater transparency of expectations, which we believe can also contribute to enhancing student health and mental wellbeing around stress and anxiety, a concern raised by many of our students and a key agenda in current higher education (OfS 2020; Universities UK 2018). Indeed, excessive competition for academic excellence can have a detrimental effect on the student learning experience. For this, the mentality of 'being good enough' can be promoted that entails 'being willing and able to respond to others demands, but also being willing to recognise our own limitations' (Spicer 2019). This way of thinking can be very useful as one of our students, Doris (FG20), expressed that 'it's easy to get caught up in feeling like you're not doing enough … because everyone's amazing'. Here, the mindset of 'being good enough' can potentially manifest students to consider the concept of ideal as being imperfect and most importantly realistic. That said, there are caveats to be acknowledged. Large graduate employers may demand good grades (e.g. a 2:1 or above) as a key indicator of applicants' competence, along with other desirable requirements. It is worth noting that our consideration of 'being good enough' as a way of thinking is in response to the undue competition for academic excellence that is often perceived at elite universities, who tend to attract students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The mindset of 'being good enough' might therefore not be applicable across institutions with different student profiles. Future research should explore the pedagogical implications of this mindset across different types of institutions.

Secondly, our analyses also suggest that how a course or curriculum is structured and assessed can influence the ways in which students construct what is valued and what is not in an ideal student. For instance, a curriculum filled with heavy subject content and a high volume of assessment can lead students to mainly focus on the knowledge acquisition and limit the opportunity to reflect on their learning experience and develop other transferable skills. Staff need to be mindful with what they expect from students as the ideal university student 'should reflect the realistic ideals of stakeholders, such as staff and students, rather than an imagination that is farfetched and improbable' (Wong and Chiu 2021a, 505). Where possible and appropriate, staff should also consider incorporating the development of self-reflection and learning process into a summative assessment. The purpose is to move away from the emphasis on the reward that is often placed on the final product or submission, typically a final grade, which inadvertently presents the message that only the outcome is valued (Carless et al. 2017; Egan 2011).

By highlighting and rewarding critical reflection and evaluation in learning, students are given the opportunity to internalise the value of the process for personal growth. However, we are not suggesting that every self-reflection process should be marked or rewarded because in practice, the outcome is often what matters most. Yet, at the initial stage of students' learning journey, it is worthwhile to consider a formal reward and recognition of their learning process as a kind of

incentive to support students to appreciate and develop a greater range of ideal student attributes (Broadbent, Panadero, and Boud 2018; Jessop, El Hakim, and Gibbs 2014). Such practice can be particularly well placed for the first year of study, given the weighting is often lower than in subsequent years. Assisting students to recognise an ideal student as someone who is reflective and learning from experience, we argue, is an important step for students to appreciate the importance of the learning process, embrace the ideal student identity and embody the ideas of imperfection and realism that are central to the concept of ideal student.

On the whole, this paper reveals that students' construction of the ideal student can be influenced by a range of factors and more often than not, how students see themselves are shaped by how they think others perceive them. In other words, the identity as an ideal student can be very much *for others to judge*, which is consistent with sociological research on identity development and formation, especially through social locations and inequalities of gender, social class and ethnicity, amongst others (e.g. Arday and Mirza 2018; Jackson and Sundaram 2020). For example, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010) observed the challenges of working-class students studying at elite universities, and their identity struggles to negotiate and 'fit in' with the cultures and perceived expectations of these institutions. Reay et al. suggested that 'the type of higher education institution these working-class students attend exerts a powerful influence on how they see themselves and are seen by others in terms of both their learner and class identities' (111). Similarly, Archer, Hutchings, and Ross (2005) argued that higher education operates with 'middle-class' values, leading to inequalities and issues of exclusion from access to participation to outcome. While this paper does not specifically focus these social identities and locations, we have identified that the institutional context and students' prior cultural and educational experiences can be key factors in shaping students' construction of the ideal student. These external factors contribute to how students felt judged by others, beyond the views of individuals. Elsewhere in our research, we also discuss the extent to which the ideal student is considered by students to be an identity that is available for everyone, or more likely to be individuals from particular social backgrounds (Wong and Chiu 2021b).

Based on these discussions, we want to reiterate that it is crucial to have open and frequent conversations with students about what expectations are held of university students by which we can assist students to develop a right frame of mind for learning that balances between their intrinsic motivation and external expectations. It is with the hope that students would be able to consider the ideal student is the identity they can associate with and embody as part of their university journey.

Note

1. Most post-1992 UK universities have a historical orientation towards teaching and training, rather than research, whilst pre-1992 UK universities are mostly rooted in academic research.

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Appendix

Table A1. Student focus group details.

FG number	Discipline	University type	Group size
1	Social Sciences	Pre-92	6
2	Arts & Humanities	Post-92	3
3	Arts & Humanities	Post-92	3
4	Natural Sciences	Post-92	5
5	Social Sciences	Post-92	6
6	Social Sciences	Pre-92	5
7	Applied Sciences	Post-92	5
12	Arts & Humanities	Post-92	4
13	Social Sciences	Pre-92	7
20	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	4
21	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	5
22	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	5
23	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	5
24	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	5
25	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	3
26	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	5
27	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	5
28	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	4
29	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	3
30	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	5
31	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	4
32	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	3
33	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	5