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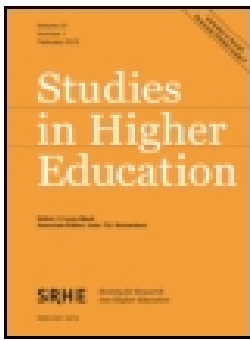
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Exploring the concept of 'ideal' university student

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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 concept of 'ideal' student is perceived, challenged and negotiated. We argue that the 'ideal' 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 have 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.

Introduction

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 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 promotes 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 explores how the concept of 'ideal' university student is understood, interpreted and recognised, as well as challenged and negotiated by university staff and students. We want to discuss the meanings of the concept of the 'ideal' student *per se*, as we set out our conceptual foundations for future discussions (outside of this paper) on the characteristics of the 'ideal' university student, where expectations of students can be more explicit and open for negotiation. 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 desirable expectations of university students. We conclude with a working definition of 'ideal' university student, which, we argue, encompasses desirability, imperfection and realism. We begin by unpacking the concept of ideal as we explain the thinking underpinning the 'ideal' university student and its purpose.

Understanding ideals

The Oxford Dictionaries ([2010](#)) defines *ideal* as 'an abstract or hypothetical optimum', 'a standard or principle to be aimed at', even though it is likely to exist 'only in the imagination'. In other words, an ideal can be interpreted as a vision or target, which is largely shaped by prior/existing experiences, knowledge, views or ideas. In our conceptualisation of the 'ideal' university student, we do not mean perfection or the best. We want to highlight what is expected of students in higher education. These expectations constitute an ideal because it represents our aspirations or targets, even if in practice these ideals may be difficult to realise (Stemplowska [2008](#)). Ideals are therefore mainly conceptual and exist to provide us with conjectural reference points.

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](#)).

For instance, knowledge of the ideal body temperature, amount of sleep, weight or blood pressure allows us to compare with an agreed, accepted or popular standard. These ideals provide a transparent benchmark, which can be challenged and revised if necessary. Such ideals are also achievable, even if only temporary. Although the ideal state or range in these examples are in quantifiable metrics, the construction of ideals can also be qualitative, with richer descriptions but also broader interpretations and therefore even disagreements. Yet, all ideals serve the same function, which is to make transparent and explicit the expectations or visions (Weber [2009](#)). For example, the phrase *ideal candidate* is often used in job advertisements to outline the requirements and expectations of the successful applicant, even though the selection process may include considerations of implicit or hidden factors that reflect internal priorities (Chiu [2019](#)).

Like beauty, ideals can be in the eye of the beholder, especially at the individual level. However, our collective ideals, or ideal types, are shared at the societal level and likely to be part of dominant discourses (Burr [2003](#)). Although by no means unanimous, these discourses, including ideals, would constitute the prevailing views and expectations. Whilst we recognise that ideals can have unintended and negative consequences, such as stereotypes, we believe that by unpacking our own ideals of the university student will encourage a more transparent conversation about the student practices that are rewarded or punished in higher education.

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](#); Wong and Chiu [2019b](#)). 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 et al. [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). By uncovering some of these ideal characteristics, students would be better informed and will have the opportunity to develop these attributes of the ideal university student, if desired, which could alleviate the mismatch of values and expectations and potentially strengthen the lecturer–student relationship – a key influence in students' academic progress and outcome (Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff 2014; Rockoff 2004). Hence, the concept of 'ideal' university student has the potential to bridge differences and manage expectations between lecturers and students, which have been stretched due to consumerism and greater student demands (Brown and Carasso 2013; Wong and Chiu 2019a). We believe in the need for greater openness on the expectations and ideals of students at university.

Research on the 'ideal' student is scarce, often dated and disparate. In the 1950s, Becker (1952) wrote about the 'ideal' pupil and reported that teachers tend to value middle-class children and their values. In the 1960s, Brown (1960) and Torrance (1965) explored the personality traits of the ideal student and their surveys concluded that academic competence and aptitude were the fundamental basis of an 'ideal' student in higher education. Literature from educational psychology, which are overwhelmingly quantitative, have also focused on individual factors as key predictors for academic success, including self-belief, motivation, preparation, learning styles, personality traits and the practice of self-regulated learning (e.g. Komarraju et al. 2011; Lee and Lee 2012; Richardson, Abraham, and Bond 2012; Robbins et al. 2004). However, academic success – or attainment – is not necessarily an attribute of the 'ideal' student in higher education (Wong and Chiu 2018). More recent studies were conducted in the school context (Bradbury 2013; Harkness et al. 2007; Maslovaty, Cohen, and Furman 2008). These studies found that attentive, disciplined, obedient, respectful, responsible and punctual students to be the 'ideal' school pupil.

At university, Thunborg, Bron, and Edstróm (2012) found that academic skills, abilities and attainment to be highly desirable of students by lecturers in their Swedish study, which included staff from biomedicine, chemistry, engineering and physiotherapy. In Denmark, tutors have envisioned the ideal physics undergraduates to be interested, committed, modest and clever (Ulriksen 2009). Here, Ulriksen also explored the concept of 'the implied student' to appreciate the relational and contextual expectations of students, including structural constraints and sub-disciplinary preferences. More recently, Wong and Chiu (2018) reported that social science lecturers in England to conceive their ideal students as prepared, engaged, committed, critical, reflective and progressing, whilst highlighting the insignificance of student attainment. In computer science, Thinyane (2013) found tutors in South Africa to rate abstract thinking, problem-solving, creativity and computer playfulness as key features in their ideal university student, while for medical students, being proactive, professional, self-directed and caring for patients are considered to be ideal in Saudi Arabia and the US (Abdulghani et al. 2014; O'Brien et al. 2016). Although the ideal university student may vary by discipline, institution and even country, these expectations and ideals, at the very least, offer current and future students an indication of the attributes that are valued in their respective contexts.

Yet, these existing studies have not critically examined the concept of the 'ideal' student *per se*. As such, this paper aims to explore the concept of 'ideal' student in the higher education context, drawing on the views, perspectives and conceptualisations of university staff and students. Rather than mapping the characteristics of ideal university students, which is reported separately, our focus here is to discuss the theoretical potentials and practical possibilities with the concept of 'ideal' university student. We appreciate that the concept of 'ideal' is riddled with presumptions and ambiguities, but our starting point recognises that key stakeholders such as staff, student and institutions do have expectations of university students, be it stated or unstated. These expectations and ideas can have real consequences for students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, if there are mismatches of values and practices. This paper will further develop our understanding of the notion of 'ideal' university student as we highlight the conceptual challenges and

possibilities, before making the case for the value of this concept as we strive to continue and construct working definitions and models that map the range of 'ideal' university student characteristics across contexts.

The study

Funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust, this paper is based on an ongoing project that explores the breadth and nuances of the 'ideal' university student. 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. 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,[1] from the broad disciplines of the applied science, arts & humanities, natural science and social science.

Data were collected between 2017 and 2018. We conduced ten focus groups with 48 students and ten focus groups with 27 staff. Focus group size for staff is smaller due to availability, but given our staff were expressive, smaller groups enabled discussions at greater depth. We adopted the method of focus group to promote discussions and interactions between participants to highlight, debate and reflect on 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 staff or students from the same degree programme or department. Most students were undergraduates ($n = 35$), with some masters and doctoral students ($n = 13$), who took part in three focus groups. Our staff came from a range of teaching and research backgrounds, from one to over 25 years of teaching experiences in higher education.

We conducted at least four focus groups with participants from each of the four broad disciplines mentioned above. The majority of participants were female ($n = 52$) and self-identified as White, White British or White European ($n = 42$). We would have preferred a stronger gender balance, but we note that 14 of the 20 focus groups had at least one male participant. Each focus group lasted an hour on average and was audio-recorded, with the data transcribed verbatim and personal details anonymised (see Appendix 1). Participants were prompted to discuss their thoughts and views around the notion of the 'ideal' university student, including their expectations of students 'in an ideal world' as well as a comparison with their understandings of the good student (to be discussed in a separate output). All focus groups (FGs) began with the question, *what do you think about the term 'ideal' student?* and a range of responses was 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'.

Although a few staff admitted their initial scepticism about the notion of the ideal student *per se*, all participants shared and articulated their own expectations of students 'in an ideal world'. Most participants mentioned at the end that their participation has provided them with 'food for thought', as well as a greater appreciation of the fluidity and potentials of the concept of 'ideal' university student. As one staff said, 'I mentioned to you before we started that I would actually never use that term … But I think it makes sense now to have this term … I've never really thought about it that deep' (FG15, Staff). 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 (Burr 2003). Focus group data were managed and organised using the software *NVivo*. 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).

A provisional coding framework was established after the authors independently coded the same data (three transcripts) 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. These codes were subject to an iterative process of gradual coding refinement, with the themes being revised with emerging research data and further coding (see Appendix 2). Intersectional analyses were also applied to our codes, using the *NVivo* function *matrix-coding query*, where references (i.e. coded data) were separated by focus group-level demographics, such as by student and staff; pre-92 and post-92 universities; and broad disciplines. However, as we report below, participants from these different demographics appear to articulate similar views about the challenges and potentials of the concept of 'ideal'. We argue that the concept of 'ideal' university student is theoretically important, and even necessary, to champion transparency in expectations of students in higher education, we begin with the apprehensions and reservations, which include concerns around definitions, metrics and achievability, before we discuss the opportunities and possibilities afforded by the concept of 'ideal' university student.

Conceptual challenges

As anticipated, some participants – initially at least – associated the word *ideal* with perfection, which is understandable given dictionary definitions often consider these words as synonymous. Beyond definitional concerns, our participants also highlighted the subjectivity of ideals, as the meaning of 'ideal' university student can vary by individuals, especially from the positions of staff and students, who can have different preferences and priorities. One participant rightly said that 'each one of us has our own thoughts, views and defining features of what we would like to see a student be and become' (FG11, Staff) while another queried 'ideal for who? ideal for you? or ideal for the uni?' (FG4, Student). With multiple interpretations and constructions of ideals, our participants are concerned that 'there's not a singular understanding' (FG9, Staff) of the 'ideal' student because 'it could mean so many different things to different people' (FG17, Staff) and 'it could be misinterpreted' (FG1, Student).

When asked individually, a few struggled to consolidate the features of their own ideal student because, as one staff reflected, 'when I thought about the best students I've ever worked with, they wouldn't conform to a single ideal. They have different strengths and they come in different combinations' (FG16, Staff). In other words, there is a range of characteristics associated with the ideal student and these characteristics seem to be spread across different individuals, which aligns with Weber's (2009) theory of ideal types.

Others believed that most students, in one way or another, 'have the qualities of potentially being ideal but just not all' (FG13, Student). As one student elaborated, 'some people will hit more criteria, some will hit less' (FG3, Student). For instance, 'I might have four out of these six characteristics. Therefore, I'm not the ideal student' (FG1, Student). Here, recognitions as an ideal student, by self or by others, seem to follow a list, where the status of being ideal is only possible when all criteria are met. Yet, these views also imply that it is possible or even common for students to embody some of these ideal characteristics, even if not the full range, whatever these may be.

Relatedly, there is a concern around the metrics of 'ideal' university student. Staff in two focus groups deliberated at length about the challenges of 'assessing' the ideal student, from a more objective standpoint. Unlike coursework assignments and outcomes, which can be quantified through explicit learning outcomes, marking criteria and grades, some staff suggested that 'choosing the metrics will be difficult' (FG17, Staff) for the ideal student because 'those things aren't measurable

[and] aren't assessed' (FG19, Staff). Drawing on their own preferences in students, one queried 'how do we judge curiosity?' (FG17, Staff), for example, whilst another asked, besides a reference letter, 'how do you quantify to an employer … that the student has a good attitude?' (FG19, Staff). Essentially, questions are raised here about the objectivity of recognising (or assessing) different 'ideal' university student characteristics, although we remain to be convinced that an objective paradigm is required or appropriate.

Some participants rightly feared that a list of ideal student characteristics could create a *hierarchy*, as some attributes will inevitably be valued more than others. The concern here is that the identification of ideal student characteristics might limit 'opportunities for expression' as aspirational students could, in order to become ideal, all end up 'in the same way … [with] no variations' (FG13, Student). While our respondents acknowledge that the availability of a list 'would be great … for some people because they need that clarity', a list 'could be limiting' for others (FG7, Student). In other words, by specifying *what is* considered to be ideal, we are simultaneously inferring *what is not* ideal. This process of inclusion and exclusion has power implications around dominant and marginal discourses, with an underlying concern about the extent to which ideal student characteristics might privilege or disadvantage particular groups. Yet, we believe that an occluded and unspecified range of desirable attributes are even more problematic as these actively contribute to inequalities in student experiences and outcomes due to their unfamiliarity with higher education (Crozier et al. 2008; Johnston 2010).

Another conceptual challenge raised by participants is the *achievability* of the ideal student identity, with suggestions that 'to have an ideal student, you'd need an ideal lecturer … an ideal institution, an ideal society and none of those things coexist' (FG10, Staff). While the same staff admitted that 'we can maybe imagine what an ideal student might look like', the sentence concluded with 'but it doesn't exist'. Interestingly, that staff later asserted that 'we have to be *real* with them [students] about our expectations', which implies that the ideal student can be unrealistic and ironically, not ideal *per se*. This apparent contradiction is also illustrated in a student discussion (FG2, Student):

Student 1:   It's not reality to be that ideal. I think it would be really difficult to have all of these aspects at once.
Student 2:   It's not very ideal.
Student 3:   Yeah. It's not. It's not ideal because … everybody's different so you can't expect everybody to be this one category of student.

The tension here, dubbed when the ideal is *not* ideal, is interlinked with perceptions of reality and the plausibility of students to embody the 'ideal' university student identity or characteristics. Concerns that being an ideal student are beyond the reach for most if not all students bring to question whether the ideal student is really a reflection of our own ideals and desires. We revisit this apparent conundrum later. If the ideal student – as interpreted by some participants – is not considered as ideal, is it possible to reimagine a more realistic ideal student? Or perhaps the ideal student, as one staff commented, is precisely 'not the typical student, but beyond typical, the sort of student that you would like to have' (FG18, Staff).

So far, we highlight the challenges perceived by students and staff about the concept of 'ideal' university student, from definition to interpretation to identification. As the focus groups progressed, there were growing appreciations that the concept of ideal has the potential to champion explicit expectations of university students. As one student later commented, 'even if [the ideal student] is not feasible, we do have these ideas' (FG13, Student) as there are recognitions that these presumptions can shape their actions and practices. Similarly, one staff acknowledged that they 'definitely tap into ideas about what student is better or worse, or preferable … because I do have views' (FG10, Staff). We consider these preferences and views as components of their own ideal student, which we explore below.

Unpacking the 'ideal' university student

Staff and students, when probed, all offered their views and expectations of university students. These expectations, we argue, constitute their constructions of the ideal student because these features are desirable, valued and ideal. As individuals may desire different traits in university students, the aim would be to collate a range of perspectives to highlight the collective views. As one participant remarked on our project, 'I think it's a really interesting study. It's a challenge because I think you're working with an abstract there on what ideal means, but you may be able to unpack the components of what this troubled word means' (FG11, Staff). We discussed some of the challenges earlier and in this section, we focus on participants' conceptualisation of the ideal student, some of which responds to the challenges aforementioned as we aim to further develop the concept.

The definitional link between *ideal* and *perfect* has been disputed by some participants in later discussions. One staff argued that 'I wouldn't be thinking of a perfect student even when you ask the question "ideal" … [because] in some ways, we're looking for the *idealised* student … the ones that we would like to teach' (FG18, Staff). Here, the 'ideal' university student is also understood to reflect ideals, desires and preferences, which can include imperfections or rooms for improvement, whilst the term perfect seems to entail flawlessness. As one staff explained, 'we can think of ideal student in a different way, which is that ideal student is the one who we see as progressing … and not already perfect' (FG8, Staff). Considering this, we argue that the disassociation of ideal student from being perfect is important as the latter interpretation can be a popular but rigid and misinformed perception about the concept of ideal.

Some participants considered the ideal student to exist only as characteristics, rather than as a specific person. As one staff clarified, 'actually what you're looking at is the attributes around the ideal student' (FG19, Staff); to paraphrase, the ideal attributes desirable of university students. One student suggested that there should be 'basic … [and] common characteristics' expected of the ideal student, such as 'attending lectures, writing down notes, being independent, being inquisitive [and] asking questions' (FG13, Student). While these different characteristics are explored elsewhere, the concept of 'ideal' university student aims to offer students and staff an open thinking space to populate attributes that are considered to be ideal, by themselves as well as by others. For some, there are certain baseline expectations and ideals of university students that should transpire across level of study, disciplines and even institutions or countries, such as attendance.

Others, however, argued that features of the 'ideal' university student are not universal but change according to context. According to one student, 'what is ideal shifts according to who we're being taught, you're like morphing into different images of an ideal student' (FG13, Student). Another student agreed that while 'there are things that they [staff] want us to be at the end of the day', the ideal student can 'vary from where you are or the institution you are in' (FG5, Student). Here, students acknowledge and appreciate that ideals can be relational, which means being an ideal student may be more possible in some setting over others. It is important, therefore, that conceptualisations and constructions of the 'ideal' university student to consider and reflect on any contextual priorities, such as discipline or institutional specific values. As one staff reflected on how their views had evolved during the focus group:

> I was coming prepared to give you a lovely little speech how there is no such thing as an ideal student. Right now, it hit me that I've worked for quite a few years in different universities and I remember one thing – the one thing I miss actually [is] that no one ever dared to come to class unprepared … You could not imagine any students in [pre-92/elite] institutions setting foot in class without having done at least two thirds of what they were supposed to do. (FG9, Staff)

The comment above highlights two points. First, initial concerns or rejections of the concept of ideal student can be mitigated through deeper discussions and self-reflections. Second, expectations of students can vary by university (e.g. pre/post-92 institutions), who tend to attract different student profiles. We acknowledge that there may be contextual expectations of students specific to individual universities or even disciplines, but we also have voices which suggest that there are foundational

student characteristics that are *universally desirable* in higher education, at least at the abstract and ideal level.

Interestingly, our students also said that the term ideal student is rarely used by their tutors, even when expectations of students are communicated, which are instead often written in module/programme handbooks. As one group discussed (FG12, Student):

Student 1:	There's a booklet that says everything you have to do; you have to be present a certain percentage of the time, you have to achieve certain grades otherwise you don't pass, you have to attend this and this and meet this.
Student 2:	But the tutors or the university … haven't labelled that as the ideal student …
Student 1:	No, they didn't, it would be like the minimum you have to do to be here.

Here, expectations of students are set out as the minimum requirement, which might be useful for monitoring purposes. By comparison, the 'ideal' university student is beyond the minimum as it sets out the desirable features of student, although ideal does not necessarily mean the best or the highest (grade).

Our participants also discussed the importance of explicitness and the dangers of presumptions, which, as existing literature can attest, can result in or further reinforce social inequalities. As one staff recognised, 'I think students do increasingly need more explicit guidelines … we shouldn't assume that they know' (FG10, Staff) about the demands of university, whilst another believed that concept of the ideal student 'can be quite helpful because it can set a series of yardsticks to measure against' (FG10, Staff). As such, the concept of 'ideal' can offer students an opportunity to situate, reflect or compare themselves with the features that are considered to be desirable in a university student. Similarly, another staff said that 'students here want to understand exactly what you want from them. They get really frustrated and anxious if they feel like they don't know exactly what to do … so give them a list' (FG17, Staff).

As can be seen, the concept of 'ideal' university student can offer a clearer and more concrete attempt to spell out expectations of students, at the desirable rather than the minimum level. An unpacking of these ideal expectations of students can also provide students with an *approved template* to develop as higher education students. These views were also expressed by students, who associated the ideal student to a prototype that sets out the desirable features of students:

> Lecturers could say at the start of the year, this is what the ideal student did last year, and this is what we expect of you. So, if you want to try and push yourself and be that ideal student then … students can do what the criteria say if they want. (FG3, Student)

Here, our students appreciate the availability of a guideline for those who wish to be an 'ideal' university student. Whether or not a student could or should aspire or develop to be an ideal student merit a deeper discussion, but the premise is that expectations of university students, in an ideal world, should be transparent, explicit and most importantly, realistic. In sum, it is clear that desirable expectations of student exist, from staff and students, which we conceptualise as the 'ideal' university student.

'Ideal' university student: a conceptual conundrum?

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 (see Wong and Chiu 2018). 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). The 'ideal' university student is meant to represent our ideals, and not the irony where the ideal student is instead considered as *not* ideal because it is unrealistic and impossible. We reiterate that our conceptualisation is underpinned by Weber's (2009) theory of ideal types, a mental construct that reflects the breadth of desirable features, which can vary by context. Ideal types, and indeed the 'ideal' university student, would constitute the collectively agreed range of ideal attributes that can be found from a range of students, rather than an individual.

We emphasise that the concept of 'ideal' university student is still a work in progress. It can be seen as a thinking tool to better understand the expectations and experiences of university students. There are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed and discussed, including the conundrum of whether an explicit approach towards understanding the ideal student characteristics could result in a *list of ideals* that can potentially confine alternative (and *unlisted*) expressions of student practices and identities. The process of specifying and identifying what characteristics are considered as ideal are intertwined within complex power relations, especially between staff and students but also wider social inequalities such as gender, class and 'race'/ethnicity. For example, the voices of staff are fundamental in the construction of 'ideal' university student characteristics, although it is equally important for students to be engaged in this process, given the rise in student-staff partnerships in higher education (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). Ultimately, the purpose of the concept is to provide students with the opportunity to consider and make their own meanings out of the range of desirable characteristics in an ideal student, which is central to inclusive and diverse learning practices. More broadly, implicit rules and practices can breed inequalities, especially by social class, where more or less-privileged students operate with different resources and dispositions to navigate their higher education journeys (e.g. Crozier et al. 2008). Transparency plays a key role to reduce inequalities caused by assumptions, as well as to manage and negotiate differences, if any, in expectations between staff and students, especially those from non-traditional as well as international backgrounds.

While staff and students might have varied views towards the ideal characteristics of university students, our analysis did not find any notable differences between their respective views about the concept of the 'ideal' student *per se*. We must also remain vigilant and aware as to whether our 'ideal' university student characteristics might advantage or disadvantage particular social groups, and what countermeasures could be in place to support students to develop the desirable characteristics that are valued and rewarded. For instance, these may be supplementary skills workshops or a holistic approach that embed the development of ideal student characteristics as part of students' university education. Despite the concerns of an explicit approach, we believe the damage of an implicit approach is worse, as unspoken assumptions and expectations of students offer limited guidance to develop as university students, especially for those from non-traditional backgrounds.

The 'ideal' university student may comprise of a range of attributes, but these are not absolute and are intended to reflect the situated ideals and desires of students in specific context and circumstance. As mentioned already, 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. In other words, the ideal student characteristics should be desirable but also realistic, even though no individual is expected to embody the full spectrum of ideal attributes (e.g., see also '*possible selves*', Henderson, Stevenson, and Bathmaker 2019). We do not envision the 'ideal' university student to be a means to an end, or to have a status of being accomplished or achieved, but rather as a continuous process of reflecting, being and becoming, in relation to the ideal features of university students. Identifications with the range of 'ideal' university student characteristics are likely to be fractional and rarely, if ever, complete. And even if complete, this association is temporary and always 'in process'.

The concept of 'ideal' university student also champions a shift in paradigm from minimal requirements (e.g. attendance and attainment for progression) to desirable outcome. The concept aims to promote an indicative but not prescriptive range of ideal student characteristics that enable a more

transparent staff–student relationship that we believe can contribute to a fairer and more equitable higher education. The rules of higher education are explicit and implicit. The former reflects official guidelines and procedures, especially the minimum expectations. The latter is malleable, ambiguous and even assumed, including our desirable and ideal features of university students that we emphatically argue do exist.

As such, the concept of 'ideal' university student is about making expectations of students more explicit and apparent. We want to encourage key stakeholders, especially staff and students, to thoroughly reflect and explicitly note down the practices and values that are desirable for university students. Universities and staff could then play a proactive and collaborative role to support students to develop the range of identified student characteristics that are considered as important within their respective contexts. For students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, university constitutes a new and even foreign environment, which are often very different from their prior experiences of education in schools (Johnston 2010). The concept of 'ideal' university student can highlight the difference as well as the gaps in expectations of students between schools and universities, contributing to student transition into higher education, both in practice and research.

This paper discussed the conceptual purpose of the concept of 'ideal' university student. 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.

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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Appendices

Appendix 1. Focus group details

Focus group	Participant	Discipline	University type	Group size
1	Students	Social Sciences	Pre-92	6
2	Students	Arts & Humanities	Post-92	3
3	Students	Arts & Humanities	Post-92	3
4	Students	Natural Sciences	Post-92	5
5	Students	Social Sciences	Post-92	6
6	Students	Social Sciences	Pre-92	5
7	Students	Applied Sciences	Post-92	5
8	Staff	Social Sciences	Post-92	3
9	Staff	Social Sciences	Post-92	4
10	Staff	Arts & Humanities	Pre-92	2
11	Staff	Applied Sciences	Post-92	2
12	Students	Arts & Humanities	Post-92	4
13	Students	Social Sciences	Pre-92	7
14	Staff	Arts & Humanities	Post-92	2
15	Staff	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	2
16	Staff	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	2
17	Staff	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	3
18	Staff	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	3
19	Staff	Applied Sciences	Pre-92	4
20	Students	Natural Sciences	Pre-92	4

Appendix 2 – Coding framework (concise)
Defining 'ideal'
Difficulty or challenges to conceptualise ideal

  Measuring ideal – checklist for ideal
  Relativity / relational understandings
  Power and hierarchies – including stereotypes and biases
  When ideal is 'not' ideal

Ideals exist – we have ideals
Opportunities and potentials of the concept of ideal

  Definition subtleties – ideal is not same as perfect
  An explicit guide or template for students / being transparent helps
  Beyond minimal expectations, to desirable expectations

Views of ideal student across contexts (student vs staff, university types, disciplines, study levels)
[Other key themes to be explored elsewhere]
Student self-identifications with ideal identity/staff identifications of ideal student
Perception of the 'ideal' student
Ideal student as … [A *range of sub nodes*]
Most & least important attributes of ideal student
[*A range of sub nodes*]
Views of ideal student alongside other social identities