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University lecturers' construction of the 'ideal' undergraduate student

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Wong, B. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7310-6418 and Chiu, Y.-L. T. (2020) University lecturers' construction of the 'ideal' undergraduate student. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 44 (1). pp. 54-68. ISSN 0309-877X doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2018.1504010 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/78569/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1504010

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

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Journal of Further and Higher Education

ISSN: 0309-877X (Print) 1469-9486 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjfh20

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To cite this article: Billy Wong & Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu (2018): University lecturers' construction of the 'ideal' undergraduate student, Journal of Further and Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2018.1504010

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1504010

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Published online: 17 Sep 2018.

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JOURNAL OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1504010

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University lecturers' construction of the 'ideal' undergraduate student

Billy Wong [a] and Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu [b]

[a]Institute of Education, University of Reading, Reading, UK; [b]Imperial College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Research on the 'ideal' or 'good' student tends to be situated within compulsory schooling. Few recent studies have focused on lecturers' conceptualisation and construction of the 'ideal' university student. Informed by 30 in-depth interviews with lecturers from two post-92 English universities within the social sciences, we explore how the notion of 'ideal' student is understood in contemporary higher education. We focus on lecturers' expectations of undergraduate students, as well as their views of the 'ideal' student in different teaching and learning contexts. We identified specific personal and academic skillsets that are desirable of students, including preparation, engagement and commitment, as well as being critical, reflective and making progress. The ability to achieve high grades, interestingly, is rarely mentioned as important. Implications for policy and practice are discussed as we present a much-needed update on the current features of the 'ideal' university student, which can influence student experience, especially the lecturer-student relationship.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 17 February 2018
Accepted 19 July 2018

KEYWORDS
Views of student; good student; ideal university student

Introduction

The rising cost of university has prompted researchers from countries such as the UK, Australia and Sweden to raise concerns about the massification and marketisation of higher education, which has propelled student consumerism deeper into the higher education discourse (Anne-Charlotte et al. 2013; Pitman, Koshy, and Phillimore 2015; Thornton 2014; Tomlinson 2017; Wong and Chiu 2017). Recent higher education research has focused on what universities and staff can do to support students. Less is known of the views of university lecturers amid these changes, beyond their reflections on teaching practices or excellences (Wood and Su 2017; Uiboleht, Karm, and Postareff 2016). Despite the prominence of the student-as-consumer discourse, lecturers are still fundamental in the student learning experience. Lecturers are often the ones who design, teach and assess university courses following the university standards and expectations. As such, students are still expected to produce work that is appropriate for university, which means lecturers will inevitably form ideas and expectations of university students. These voices and perspectives remain a critical yet underexplored aspect of the higher education discourse as there is more research on what students expect of lecturers than research on what lecturers expect of their students.

In this paper, we present a conceptualisation of the 'ideal' university student, drawing on an empirical study that explored the expectations that lecturers in the social sciences have of their students. By understanding the student characteristics that are considered by lecturers as ideal and desirable, we believe the notion of the 'ideal' university student can promote greater transparency

CONTACT Billy Wong b.wong@reading.ac.uk

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(through open dis/agreements) that can bridge the potential gap of expectations between lecturers (themselves) and students, which has been stretched due to consumerism and greater student demands (Brown and Carasso 2013). We argue it is important for students, lecturers, university staff and policymakers to acknowledge and recognise the different ideas and expectations that lecturers have of students so that potential mismatches of expectations can be appropriately addressed, especially if these expectations can influence student experiences or outcomes. We begin by explaining our conceptual thinking around the notion of the 'ideal' student.

Understanding the 'ideal' student

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. Ideals are mental constructs that can be used to comprehend, analyse and make comparisons with social reality. Based on the premise that every social action (e.g. greetings, going to school) has an ideal, or an expectation, due to social/cultural conventions and experiences (which are time/space specific), the formation of ideals is important for social stability and functioning (Weber 2009). Following Weber, our approach to the 'ideal' student reflects the ideas, or mental images, that we form through imaginations of the desirable traits and characteristics. As such, the ideal student is not meant to be a direct reflection of specific individuals with particular attributes. Rather, the ideal student constitutes a collective recognition of the range of features that we might find across a spectrum of students.

Given that ideals can also be imaginary, we find De Ruyter and Conroy's (2002) concept of 'imagined identity' useful, which is understood to be an 'aspect of the identity … [that] is not yet realised, but which the person would like to achieve in the future' (510). Here, the construction of ideals is integral in identity development, even if imagined. While an imagined identity can shed light on what one strives to achieve, typically for themselves, an imagined identity can also be formed through the ideals and expectations of others, especially since intelligible identities are sustained through recognition by self as well as by others (Lawler 2014). While De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) explored the imagined identities of school students themselves, we believe there is much to learn about the imagined identities that are constructed by others, such as the ideal university student from the perspectives of lecturers, who are key agents in the creation and maintenance of university discourses. Although the notion of ideal student or learner is sometimes used synonymously with the 'good' student, we stress that the former is intended to be theoretical while the latter is often applied to particular individuals. Our purpose here is to elicit the attributes that lecturers consider as ideal for students in higher education.

Earlier studies (e.g. Brown 1960; Torrance 1965) into the ideal student tend to be quantitative, with a survey for educators and students to rank or tick from a range of personality traits, such as intelligence, diligence, maturity, integrity, dependability, individuality and growth during their education journeys. While these studies recognised the importance of student development, the traits of intelligence and academic performance continue to dominate the fundamental characteristics expected of the ideal university student. 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 and Furman 2008). These studies noted that in schools, being docile, disciplined, obedient, respectful, punctual and attentive are often key characteristics expected of the ideal pupil (see Thompson 2010). Through policy analysis, Bradbury (2013) also argued that the ideal student in early years education is now dominated by neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility, rational choice and self-regulation – or what Walkerdine (2003) called the 'neoliberal subject'.

In her earlier work, Walkerdine (1990) also deliberated concerns that perceptions of the ideal student are bounded by social identities and inequalities, with White middle-class boys the archetype of the ideal student in schools. Many studies have since investigated wider stereotypes and expectations of students through sociological lenses of gender, social class and/or 'race'/

ethnicity (e.g. Ball 2010; Crozier and Davies 2008; Francis and Skelton 2005; Lareau 2011; Strand 2012). These studies confirm that young people's social locations can generate specific student experiences, including different expectations from teachers of students from various backgrounds.

By comparison, our understanding of the expectations of students from lecturers is underexplored in the higher education context. We believe that students, especially those from backgrounds with limited experiences, presumptions or resources in higher education (e.g. 'non-traditional'[1] university students, as discussed below), will benefit from a more explicit understanding and articulation of the characteristics that are valued and rewarded by lecturers. In other words, the characteristics of the ideal university student that we set out to explore 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. 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, Friedmanm and Rockoff 2014; Rockoff 2004).

Expectations of students in higher education

Our interest in lecturers' perception of the ideal student stemmed from our personal experiences of the changing expectations of students and lecturers after the tuition fees rise in England. Recent higher education policies (e.g. 'Higher education: success as a knowledge economy', see BIS 2016) have positioned students as consumers who are 'at the heart of the system' (i.e. 2011 white paper, see BIS 2011), with the emphasis on the student experience and the support universities and lecturers could provide. Research in higher education has tended to focus on the student experience, including those from non-traditional backgrounds (e.g. Crozier et al. 2008; Holdsworth 2006; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Leathwood and Read 2009; Wong 2018). These studies, among many others, have explored students' experiences and achievements in a range of context, including the influence of gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity, as well as issues of discontinuation, transition into university and their 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). By comparison, the views and expectations of lecturers are underplayed, who are also at the heart of the higher education system.

With the proliferation of higher education as a market and students as consumers, the role of lecturers and their expectations of students are undergoing continuous change (Skelton 2012), especially in England. Existing literature (in England, Rolfe 2002; in Finland, Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backman 2005) suggests that students are already more pragmatic and instrumental in their studies. Informed by wider neoliberal ideologies, lecturers have implied that contemporary students are more interested in the acquisition of degree certificates, rather than to experience life as university students.

From the perspectives of students (in Spain, Llamas 2006), however, the ideal student is someone who is passionate about learning and active in wider university life, in addition to academic competence, curiosity and engagement. Relatedly, Leathwood (in England, 2006) added that independence is considered by undergraduates as highly desirable (see also Leese 2010), although these characteristics of an ideal student may be culturally specific in that it may only be available to particular students (e.g. White privileged students, especially males).

By the same token, it is not inconceivable that the social identities of lecturers might also generate specific expectations around the ideal university student. Such concerns are raised by Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose (2013), who speculated that if the ideal student is based on lecturers' own experiences and profiles – and given that academia tends to reflect specific middle-class dispositions – then expectations of the ideal university student might only reflect and

reproduce classed discourses and expectations. Similarly, Read, Robson and Francis (2004) argued that lecturers' perception of 'good' and 'bad' essays are gendered in that female and male academics have different preferences and emphases. As such, the ideal university student identity may not be available to every student, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds (Leathwood 2006).

We found a small body of literature which explored the views of lecturers toward the ideal university student, which noted a difference based on student status (as 'home' or 'international' student) and the disciplines of lecturers (Thunborg, Bron, and Edström 2012). According to Tange and Jensen (2012), the ideal university student would typically imbue the characteristics that reflect attributes promoted by the domestic educational system. International students, on the other hand, are typically constructed by lecturers from a deficit lens. In the contexts of Denmark (Tange and Jensen 2012) and Canada (Vinther and 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. These characteristics are typical of home students. International students, on the other hand, are often considered as passive, obedient and lacking critical viewpoints in seminars and supervisions. In other words, international students tend to be considered as knowledge recipients who lack autonomy and thus not usually considered as an ideal student, even if some are considered diligent. Of course, these characteristics can also be found in home students but, as discussed earlier, these attributes may be more common among particular social groups and patterned by wider structural variables (Leathwood 2006).

Perceptions of the ideal student can also vary by discipline. In a study of ideal medical students in the USA, O'Brien et al. (2016) found the attributes of being proactive and self-directed to be prominent in supervisors' perceptions of the ideal student in the medical field. The other qualities mentioned include academic competence, personal commitment and being professional, as well as discipline-specific attributes such as caring for patients. Similar characteristics were noted by Abdulghani et al. (2014) in the Saudi Arabian context from the perspectives of medical students. For computer science students, Thinyane (2013) found lecturers in South Africa to rate self-efficacy, abstract thinking, creativity, computer playfulness and problem-solving as key characteristics of the ideal university student. While lecturers across disciplines may value specific qualities relevant to their fields, Thunborg, Bron and Edström (2012) concluded that students' academic skills, abilities and attainment remain the most important attributes for lecturers in their Swedish study, which included lecturers from the disciplines of biomedicine, chemistry, engineering, physiotherapy and social work.

The aforementioned studies are predominately within the natural sciences, with the social sciences – which itself is a qualitatively different discipline – underexplored in terms of lecturers' perceptions of the ideal student. By understanding how the ideal student is perceived in specific contexts (e.g. the social sciences within post-92 universities), we are in a better position to assess and potentially bridge any differences between the teaching and learning expectations of lecturers and students.

The study

Drawing on an exploratory study of 30 in-depth interviews (18 women and 12 men) with social science lecturers from two post-92 universities in England, we explored the how social science lecturers construct their ideal university student. The aim was not to generalise but to offer an insight into the views and expectations of lecturers toward students, in light of rising neoliberal policies. Data were collected between 2016 and 2017, and lecturers would have experienced the full cycle of undergraduate students who experienced the higher fees regime. The study was approved by the authors' institutional ethics committees.

The two post-92 universities were based in London, both with a diverse student population in terms of age, ethnicity and entry routes into higher education. There is a high proportion of first-generation and non-traditional students in both institutions. Post-92 universities are historically

more teaching-oriented and thus appropriate for our investigation. Our participants were lecturers teaching in the broad discipline of the social sciences, whose views about the ideal student remain relatively undocumented. University lecturers were purposefully invited to participate through email invitations and we recruited lecturers with a range of teaching experiences and backgrounds, from one to over 30 years of teaching in higher education, as well as being graduates themselves from Russell group (i.e. 'elite'), post-92 and universities outside of the UK. Some were also the first in their family to have attended university while others had previously had a career outside of academia. Collectively, our lecturers were involved in over 10 different programmes, mostly in undergraduate degrees, with some in postgraduate teaching and supervision. While all are considered to be part of the social sciences, as an indication, our lecturers taught across subjects including criminology, economics, education, international relations, politics and sociology. Although our focus was on the broad discipline of the social sciences, we acknowledge and are conscious that there may be subdiscipline-or even programme-specific structures that could shape lecturers' views and experiences.

The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an hour on average. Audio data were transcribed verbatim and lecturers' details anonymised with pseudonyms allocated. To strengthen anonymity, the specific department and university of each lecturer are undisclosed, alongside any sensitive details that could risk exposing their identities. Lecturers were asked to share their views about teaching, as well as their preferences and expectations of students in different learning contexts, such as in lectures, seminars and individual supervisions. In particular, lecturers were probed to describe their visions of an ideal student at university (see Appendix 1). As a reflection, we noted that most lecturers were very expressive and talkative, although a few lecturers found it uneasy to make explicit statements on specific questions about the ideal student. For instance, there were articulated and 'academic'/diplomatic responses when lecturers were asked to deconstruct the ideal student by social identities, which meant questions around students' gender, class and ethnicity in relation to the ideal student yielded limited data for analysis. Such reluctance is not a surprise given the awareness and diversity practices that many social science lecturers themselves are already engaged in, even though some lecturers did elaborate on the importance of age or, more precisely, student maturity. Others found it easier to talk about their minimum (rather than their maximum or ideal) expectations of university students. We acknowledge that such hesitancy to describe or, in some cases, to accept that this terminology may reflect particular epistemological, philosophical or research perspectives, including concerns around labelling and stereotyping. We believe such reluctance also illustrates the fluidity and difficulty of the notion of the ideal student and we revisit this in the Discussion. For clarification purposes, we revisited the key points towards the end of each interview and asked lecturers to summarise their views and expectations of students in an ideal world.

Data analysis is informed by a social constructionist perspective that understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr 2003). Interview data were managed and organised using *NVivo*. Interview data and initial codes were created through the identification of common and relevant themes that emerged in the early stages of data collection and 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 each author independently coded the same interview data (i.e. the initial 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, as lower-level concepts, and these concepts were gradually developed into higher-level themes, where two key dimensions of the ideal student were conceived (Corbin and Strauss 2014). For example, the theme *personal skillsets* emerged from the sub-codes of *preparation, engagement* and *commitment*, which were themselves developed from lower-level concepts, such as *reading* and *punctuality*. These themes were subject to an iterative

process of gradual coding refinement, with the themes being revised with emerging research data and further coding. The revised themes constituted the foundation of thematic charts – a matrix Table that illustrates all the indexed data from individual sources under the relevant themes (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). While some of the original language (i.e. from the transcript) was maintained, data in thematic charts were summarised by key points in a process comparable to a 'funnel', where concepts became more abstract (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). These themes were also analysed as discourses of the ideal university student, with the focus on the ways in which lecturers articulate their preferences in an ideal student (Burman and Parker 1993). The codes were interpreted as ideal types and imagined identities, which considered lecturers' previous experiences, current expectations and future preferences of teaching undergraduate students. As discussed below, these discourses, or characteristics, of the ideal university student are not mutually exclusive and can be seen as different fragments of an ideal student – which, as Weber (2009) reminds us, are only imaginary when pieced together as a whole.

Characteristics of the 'ideal' university student

We are aware that the concept of the ideal student can be contentious, as inferred by some lecturers in the data collected. 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 lecturers do have particular expectations of students that will contribute to our understanding of the ideal university student, even when, as mentioned earlier, that some appeared unsure of the term per se. As discussed below, these expectations and ideals can broadly be grouped into personal and academic skillsets.

Personal skillsets: preparation, engagement and commitment

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 lecturers 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 lecturers value the importance of reading as students make preparation for their studies.

All lecturers mentioned a desire for their students to have read something in preparation for a teaching session. Students should have an awareness of the topic prior to each teaching session, either through the download of lecture slides, the course handbook or the readings that are required or optional. Many lecturers, such as Mandy, reiterated that 'reading is essential. I want them to come prepared. This is the ideal thing for me'. Having done the reading, students 'will actually know what we will be talking about' (Ellen) and 'that helps them to understand the material at a deeper level' (Yvonne). However, most lecturers conceded that, especially for lectures, reading 'doesn't happen at all' (Anna), which 'can make some aspects of the lecture very difficult' (Rick). For example, Nicole admitted that 'I will be very lucky if one person read it'. There is a sense of inevitable acceptance that while reading preparation is highly desirable, the practice of academic reading has declined substantially among recent undergraduate students. Good preparation is often instigated by student motivation, which also supports their engagement and participation.

As such, it is not surprising that lecturers prefer students who are motivated, engaged and active participants in the learning process. For lecturers, the role of teaching is made easier when students are interested in the topic or course. Here, an ideal student is those who 'wants to learn and wants to be challenged' (Tony), as well as those who are 'willing to try, to fail and to keep

trying' (Oliver). In other words, a committed study attitude and work ethic are highly valued. Nicole envisioned that ideal students 'don't do the reading just for an assignment, they do it for their understanding, they see that bigger picture', while for Adine this means 'someone who wants to challenge themselves and push themselves a little bit'. Here, ideal students are motivated to learn and will often go the extra mile.

Across the different teaching and learning contexts, it seems apparent that preparation, engagement and commitment are highly valued and expected of university students. According to Ellen, these attributes also highlight the importance of self-regulation, where students manage their study and 'are able to pace their work and work out what the difficulties are and how to overcome them'. A few lecturers suggested that students who are more mature are most likely to encompass these aforementioned attributes. With maturity, according to Nicole, students will often 'give it their best shot and read the reading, come to the sessions … get your grade, see how you did, reflect and move on'. While Dennis suggested that mature students, as a cohort, tend 'to have a greater understanding of why they're there', other lecturers emphasised that it is maturity, rather than age, to be the key difference. Anna imagined that ideal university students are more mature, 'not necessarily in terms of age but in terms of personality'. She explained that 'with maturity, you start thinking about options for the future'.

Academic skillsets: critical, reflective and progressing

Our lecturers highlighted particular academic skills that 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 (see next section). These academic study skills include 'being able to structure an essay, to structure an argument … basic proofreading skills [and] referencing' (Yvonne). Several lecturers have identified academic writing, or the lack of it, to be critical to students' success. William recognised that lower-than-expected grades are often due to students' inability to 'master the writing prose in a way that's eloquent but articulate'. Many commented on the importance of good writing skills since many assignments in the social sciences are text-based. As Anna said, 'if you start reading a piece of work that just reads well, you're obviously going to engage in that reading in a different way'.

Our lecturers emphasised the importance of critical thinking, reflectivity and progressing. 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. Tony envisions that students would gradually develop a certain 'level of analytical and critical thinking [to] engage with the concepts and the topics'. Nicky said basic academic writing errors should cease from year two as students begin to 'venture into the analysis, not just description, which is always really hard to make that leap'. By the final year, Tony said he would expect students to be 'very analytical [and] actively seeking to understand where it came from … using the concepts, the literature and the ideas'. An ideal student would, therefore, appear to be a critical thinker, which is a desirable attribute widely mentioned by our lecturers.

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. According to Nicole, an ideal student is 'somebody who has the ability to reflect upon their own learning and their own performance'. She explains that students who 'do particularly well, they know why', whereas 'if they don't do particularly well, they think about why and they try to rectify it, then they come to their tutor for support'. Similarly, Una said that not all students are 'willing to take feedback on board' as some 'take it as a personal criticism' despite conscious effort to stress that the comments are 'not about you [but] about the work'. Irene also expresses her frustration when students 'come to see you and they say everything is perfect and then a month later you hear that nothing is running smoothly'. Like several others, she wishes more students would 'do some self-reflection' and develop a stronger sense of self-awareness of their progress at university.

Relatedly, our lecturers said they expect students to learn and improve their academic skills over the course of their degrees, as a progressive process. William is keen to stress that 'those [skills] can be worked on, can be taught and can be practised'. As such, expectations of undergraduate students appear to increase and intensify over time. They noted different expectations of students dependent on the year/level of their university education. There is a shared recognition that first-year students are often 'very nervous' (Yasmine), so much so that some students will need 'a lot of handholding' (Nicole). As such, Yasmine said she tends to arrange students to work in pairs so that 'everybody is taking part, everybody having something to say' as a way to build up their confidence. For William, year one is the time where students are 'getting into the groove of working independently, sourcing material independently and preparing for their assignments' (William). For year two students, lecturers would ideally expect students to have thought about their future. Nicole stressed that 'we need to cut the cord' in terms of handholding as students 'need to get ready for the labour market [which is] a very competitive, very fierce world'. Final year students are expected to be more engaged and prepared for their learning, especially for assignments. Nicole said that students would ideally start 'reading for their assignment early so they don't have to take the last two weeks of their sessions off to write'. Furthermore, year three students should not be 'asking [the lecturer] what to put in an essay' (Rick), but rather be able to discuss with lecturers their own ideas about the essay. In other words, final year students are expected to be more independent and require little input from lecturers.

How important is attainment?

Benchmark attainments or pass rates are often important measurements of success and failure for schools and teachers. It is therefore not uncommon for high achievers to be recognised as ideal students in schools. Yet, higher education is structured differently where students' grades and degree classifications are not (yet) ranked nationally by university and/or degree programme. This might explain why many of our lecturers have played down the importance of academic outcome in their conceptualisations of an ideal university student. Instead, as discussed earlier, lecturers value the personal skillets of students, especially their preparation, attitude and participation. For instance, while Elizabeth admitted that 'you could interpret an ideal student as … someone who gets above this particular mark', she was keen to state that 'but I'm tending to not see it like that, they've got to put the effort in'. Similarly, for Rachel, 'an ideal student isn't really about the level that they are at … but an ideal student is someone who applies themselves to the best of their abilities'.

Many lecturers shared the view that it is effort rather than the outcome that is central to their constructions of an ideal university student. Indeed, Abby found that some 'smart students know that they are super smart and not trying hard at all to complete their work because they think that they can rely on their intelligence for everything'. While these 'smart' students do often end up with very good grades, Adine and a few others admitted to more personal satisfaction when students 'who may not know their full potential … to try to get the best out of themselves'. For these lecturers, an ideal university student has a modest personality that is driven by hard work, rather than outcome. In other words, students are praised for 'trying your best', more so than 'being the best' (Wong 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we explored the views of social science lecturers working in post-92 English universities and have identified particular personal and academic characteristics in their constructions of an ideal university student. These include students being prepared, engaged and committed, as well as being critical, reflective and making progress. Given the exploratory nature of our research, we recognise that these characteristics could be discipline- or institution-specific, and being more focused in the teaching domain, but most of these attributes we identified have long

been associated with educational learning and progress, and are also consistent with similar studies conducted in other disciplines and countries (Tange and Jensen 2012; Vinther and Slethaug 2014). Our findings also questioned the importance of attainment as our lecturers did not really consider achievement to be an important dimension of their ideal university student. We appreciate that the very idea of the ideal student may be contentious, ambiguous and even dangerous, especially in the formation of stereotypes. Yet, it is important to recognise that lecturers do form expectations of students, based on their respective teaching experiences and institutional contexts, and these expectations and ideas can have real and material consequences for students due to the mis/matching of values and practices (especially for non-traditional students). We believe that our attempt to construct a working model of the characteristics of the ideal university student is an important step towards the promotion and encouragement of greater transparency between lecturers and students on the expectations of students in higher education. Considering increased neoliberal policies in higher education, our study projects a timely and necessary voice for lecturers. Below, we revisit the key attributes of an ideal university student as constructed by our lecturers, with the focus on social identities as well as policy and practice implications.

Under the banner of preparation, the importance of reading was relentlessly emphasised by lecturers. Students would ideally have read about the topic in advance of a teaching session (Evans, Muij, and Tomlinson 2015). During teaching, students would also be expected to engage and, in some cases, to take notes and show commitment and motivation through active participation, especially in seminars. However, most lecturers conceded that in reality advanced preparation, such as reading, is increasingly rare, with students who are more mature the most likely to possess these aforementioned personal characteristics. Whilst maturity often develops with age, it is students with mental maturity – those who think and plan for the future – that are considered by some lecturers as the most likely of candidates to embody attributes of an ideal university student. Our lecturers also seemed to appreciate students who were receptive to intellectual conversations.

Relatedly, questions must also be asked if these personal, and indeed academic, skillsets are patterned by social identities such as gender, class and ethnicity (Robson, Francis, and Read 2004). For example, if maturity encourages preparation such as reading – and females often mature earlier (Sheard 2009) and are typically more motivated to read than men (McGeown et al. 2012) – would females be in a more favourable position to be an ideal university student? We might also speculate that the practice of reading is typically more aligned with middle- rather than working-class families (Ball 2003). As such, perhaps more mature, middle-class females epitomise the ideal university student? What about 'race'/ethnicity? Or other social locations such as marital/family status, special education/specific learning needs or even physical traits? The more pressing question here is to ascertain the extent to which these personal and academic skillsets actually reflect or map onto our particular social identities, which is further complicated by the intersection of identities. Furthermore, our example above only focused on preparation, but our study has identified several key characteristics of an ideal university student. Each of these characteristics, for example, might be biased toward specific gender, class, 'race'/ethnicity and so on (e.g. see Yee 2016 on students' academic strategies by class). These issues are extensively documented within higher education research. Interestingly, the attributes our lecturers used to construct the ideal student were remarkably similar to how academics themselves have conceptualised the 'excellent' university teacher. Wood and Su (2017) concluded that an excellent lecturer 'appears to be someone who is dedicated and committed, able to establish motivational learning relationships, has expertise in their subject discipline and is skilled in pedagogic approaches that encourage learner independence and critical thought' (11–12). Perhaps, as speculated by Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose (2013), lecturers do have preferences for students who exert similar personal or academic attributes to themselves, or at least in relation to their perceptions of the excellent lecturer and ideal student.

Recalling Weber's (2009) notion of ideal types and the concept of imagined identity (De Ruyter and Conroy 2002), our intention here is to unveil the range of attributes that lecturers find desirable in university students. As an ideal, we do not propose these characteristics will reflect particular individuals but rather be found across a range of students, possibly from a spectrum of social backgrounds. Given that social identity is fluid (Lawler 2014), an ideal university student may or may not reflect particular social groups, which has implications for social inequality. Further research is merited, although, as previewed in 'The study' section, some lecturers were diplomatic and cautious when probed to discuss their ideal student through the lens of social identities. These lecturers – including the few who questioned the concept of ideal student – are legitimately concerned that the formation of expectations can lead to stereotypes, which can have detrimental effects on student experience and progress. For instance, if an ideal student is constructed, presented or interpreted as narrow or exclusive, then this identity would be unavailable and unimaginable for many students, especially in universities with a diverse student body.

We acknowledge the dangers of stereotypes, but if our premise is that lecturers will inevitably develop some kind of expectations from their students, then we believe it is important to make these often-implicit features more explicit, even though the range of characteristics in an ideal student is not universal or static. Given there are disciplinary differences in university teaching, especially between the natural/applied sciences and the social sciences (Neumann 2001), such as the use of student- and teacher-centred approaches (Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi and Ashwin 2006), it is not inconceivable that our social science lecturers will form discipline-specific ideals of university students. What we were able to do was to look for possible patterns according to lecturers' own social identities. Unlike Read, Robson and Francis (2004), who found female and male tutors to have different preferences in student writing, we did not find any conclusive evidence to suggest that views of the ideal university student vary markedly by lecturers' own gender, or by any other variables we gathered, such as years of teaching experiences. Perhaps these ideal student characteristics reflect broader discipline and institutional expectations, or the wider higher education discourse.

Going forward, if we accept that mastery of these ideal student skillsets is a positive and desirable goal for students, then we are quietly optimistic about the future because a recent government initiative, on 'character education' (Harrison, Bawden, and Rogerson 2016), intends to develop and strengthen young people's life skills. Announced in December 2014, character education is targeted at schoolchildren aged 5 to 16, with the aim for 'more children [to] develop a set of character traits, attributes and behaviours that underpin success in education and work' (DfE 2015), such as perseverance, confidence, motivation and conscientiousness. These characteristics align with the personal skillsets of preparation, engagement and commitment as desired by lecturers their constructions of an ideal university student. In the long-term, when presumably character education is more immersed in compulsory schools, we might expect these traits to be more common among all future undergraduate students, rather than the exclusive few. However, as the programme is still in its infancy, more could be done in the short and medium term to support university students to develop personal skillsets that are valued, appreciated or even rewarded by lecturers. Even when character education is standardised in schools, we still need to acknowledge that higher education is a different environment where young attendees will grow into adulthood during their degrees (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012). As such, we believe higher education institutions could consider the potential value of a university-level version of character education that promotes the development of personal (and even 'professional') skillsets that would be expected of university students. Such a programme may be introduced as part of the induction to university but could also potentially be delivered and reinforced as a form of continuous student/professional development throughout or even after their degree.

It is, therefore, important for universities and lecturers to be able to offer support to university students to strengthen these desirable traits, without the assumption that incoming higher education students ought to possess or recognise the importance of these attributes. Research

into the transitional experiences of students from school to university supports the call for greater emphasis to build university identities and sense of belonging among first-year students (Johnston 2010; Thunborg, Bron and Edström 2013). As argued by Christie et al. (2008), new entrants – especially those from non-traditional backgrounds – are only learning to be a university student when they embark on their first year and might perceive academic cultures as alien to them. To bridge any expectation gaps of lecturers toward students, we support the current shift towards extended (and 'explicit', see Evans, Muij, and Tomlinson 2015) induction programmes for new university students (see also Morgan 2012 and the 'Student Experience Practitioner Transitions Model'), which should include an emphasis on character education with a focus on personal attributes such as preparation, engagement and commitment.

While students' achievement *per se* was not widely considered by our lecturers as central in an ideal university student, such views may be at odds with university targets, which are increasingly focused on student grades due to the importance of student retention and employment after graduation statistics (Brown and Carasso 2013). The current rollout of the *Teaching Excellence Framework* (TEF) – which ultimately governs the tuition fees of each English university – will only strengthen the pressure for universities to prioritise student attainments. Our lecturers value students who make progress, which somewhat aligns with the ongoing *Learning Gain* government-funded initiative (HEFCE 2016) that focuses on the development of measurements to recognise the 'distance travelled' by students in 'knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development' (but see Howson [2018], which discussed the challenges and limitations of the imitative, including the recognition that there is no 'one' measure for progress). Central to making progress, according to our lecturers within the social sciences, is for students to develop and grow in their abilities to be critical and reflective. Our findings suggest that lecturers continue to appreciate students who can articulate beyond descriptions and who can think and build on their previous submissions and feedback in their future assignments, rather than just attainment.

Interestingly, Hughes, Wainwright and Cresswell (2012) found that some social science students regard the development of these academic skills to be self-taught, rather than a collective learning process as students who seek or accept lecturer support may be seen as weak or incompetent, especially by peers. In any case, if we wish to equip university students with these desirable academic skills, a concerted effort is required by lecturers to promote the normality of academic support in the development of skills such as critical thinking and reflectivity. Embedded study-skills teaching has been mooted as a possible way forward (Chiu and Rodriguez-Falcon 2016; Daniels and Brooker 2014; Srivastava 2016), where proactive skills development, such as critical thinking, are purposefully incorporated into the teaching content, materials and assessments. For instance, embedded sessions and activities might be designed to encourage students to adopt the role of information critics as well as information recipients. Similarly, reflective practices could be more integrated into the degree programme and course curriculums (e.g. 'high-impact pedagogies', see Evans, Muij, and Tomlinson 2015), with dedicated sessions (such as seminars or individual tutorials) for students to review, revisit and reflect on their previous work. Of course, student reflection can also be encouraged and fostered outside of timetabled teaching, through avenues such as academic skills tutors and peer study groups (Lowe and Cook 2003).

This paper has presented the views and voices of lecturers toward the 'ideal' university student, from the underexplored discipline of the social sciences. Although the concept itself invites further debates, we identified particular personal and academic traits that are expected of students in an ideal world. While some are consistent with international studies, we have highlighted the apparent insignificance of student attainment as far as lecturers are concerned in their construction of the ideal university student, despite the forthcoming TEF. The next phase of this research will be 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. Although the concepts of ideal types and imagined identity allow us to generate hypothetical and desirable features of university students, we acknowledge the potential dangers of imagination, which can inform our ideals that can also create stereotypes and eventually patterns of

inequalities. However, we believe it is important that expectations of university students from lecturers should be as transparent as possible so that students (and especially those from non-traditional backgrounds) are better informed to position themselves in relation to the ideal university student.

Note

1. Non-traditional students, in UK higher education and policy discourses, include first-generation university students; students from low-income households; students from minority ethnic/racial backgrounds; mature students (age 21 or over on university entry); and/or students with a declared disability.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Billy Wong is a Lecturer in Widening Participation at the University of Reading. His areas of research are educational identities and inequalities. He has published in sociology of education and science education journals.

Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu is a Teaching Fellow in Educational Development at Imperial College London. Her areas of research are in academic writing and identity. She has published in applied linguistics journals.

ORCID

Billy Wong http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7310-6418
Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1520-5637

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Appendix 1 – Lecturer interview guide (concise version)

Background
Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
What modules or courses do you currently teach?
Views of teaching
What is your philosophy of teaching and learning?
What do you think about lectures as a method of teaching?
Ideally, what do you want students to be doing, or to have done, before and during lectures?
What do you think about seminars as a method of teaching?
Ideally, what do you want students to be doing, or to have done, before and during seminars?
What do you think about individual tutorials as a method of teaching?
Ideally, what do you want students to be doing, or to have done, before and during tutorials?
What other methods of teaching do you do/like, and why?
Construction of the ideal student
Given our expectations of students may vary dependent on where they are in their study:
What do you expect from Y1 students? Y2 students? Y3 students?
What about students at Masters/PhD Level?
From your experiences, what characteristics would you say are typical of those who are getting 1st class grades?
What about students who are borderline passes (e.g., getting around 40% most of the time)?
What kind/type of students frustrate you?
What kind/type of students make you happy?
In an ideal world, what do you want your students to be like? What do you expect from your students?
Support
What support do you normally give to students in preparation for their assignments? (Is it enough? Or too much?)
What are your views about study skills or embedded sessions?
What skills do you think students should have if they want to be successful at university?
How can we support students to get higher grades?
Summary
Is there anything else you would like to add?