

The ideal student: deconstructing expectations in higher education, by Billy Wong & Y. L. Tiffany Chiu, London, Mc Graw Hill Open University Press, 2021, 216 pp., £29.99 (Paperback), ISBN 978-0335249251

Worldwide, the university student population is on the rise and more diverse than ever. Students are confronted with rising demands and expectations from key stakeholders such as university staff. Within their volume, Billy Wong (Associate Professor, University of Reading), and Y. L. Tiffany Chiu (Senior Teaching Fellow and Programme Director, Imperial College London), provide detailed information on a mixed-methods study they conducted in UK higher education. With their research, consisting of a qualitative (focus groups) and a quantitative (survey) component they aimed at understanding what educators and students consider to be characteristics of the *ideal student*. Through their research they strive to promote a more transparent conversation between staff and students about explicit, implicit, and idealistic expectations.

The volume contains nine chapters. In the first, the authors introduce the concept of the *ideal* university student and provide an overview of the relevance and scope of their research. It is based on the premise that if “non-traditional students” knew more about expectations “... that sometimes are [...] hidden rules”, they would be better equipped to “understand and play the higher education game” (p. 4). To make this implicit knowledge visible could thereby foster social equality. The authors highlight the importance of the concept of the *ideal student* as it can encourage “critical self-reflection, explicitness and transparency” (p. 9): Finding out about and naming characteristics of ideal students might, for instance, help all concerned to reflect on whether they exhibit these characteristics or not.

In the second chapter, the authors strive to clarify what the ambiguous term *ideal* means. They develop their discussion by drawing on theories and concepts such as Max Weber's theory of ideal (or pure) types. In Chapter 3, Wong and Chiu show how university students and staff perceive the term *ideal* by using original quotes from the focus groups. They also present a working definition that encompasses notions of *desirability*, *imperfection*, and *realism* (p. 30). They "argue that the ideal student constitutes the desirable but realistic expectations of students" and point out that this has nothing to do with "perfection, or being the highest or the best" (p. 30).

The qualitative element of Wong and Chiu's mixed methods study "revealed eight [...] dimensions [...] of the ideal student" (p. 31; *Diligence & Engagement, Organisation & Discipline, Reflection & Innovation, Positive & Confident outlook, Support of Others, Academic Skills, Employability Skills* and *Intelligence & Strategic approach*). In the fourth chapter, they describe these dimensions and the 50 underlying items of the questionnaire. The authors describe the construction of the questionnaire for the quantitative study; however, the discriminability of the items is occasionally questionable (e.g. the similarity between item 35, "Being a trustworthy individual" (p. 47) and item 39 "Being an honest, moral or ethical person", (p. 48)).

In Chapters 5 to 7, Wong and Chiu shed light on differences which emerged between the examined subgroups (a) students and staff, (b) disciplines, (c) institution types (pre-92 and post-92 universities), (d) gender and (e) ethnicity on all eight dimensions. These comparisons reveal interesting findings, for example: "Students who are female, from an ethnic minority, with degree-educated parents, in their first year and aged 20 or younger tend to give higher ratings [in the questionnaire] than their counterparts" (p. 106).

Is the ideal student me? is the key question in Chapter 8. The authors elaborate on the difference between being a *good* student and being an *ideal* student. Statements from the interviews showed that while being *good* is seen "as popular and achievable" (p. 111), being an *ideal student* seems to be undesirable. Although they cannot solve "the dilemmas and difficulties associated with being ideal" (p. 118), Wong and Chiu provide with their eponymous concept: "a concrete frame of reference where different expectations of students can be mapped out for discussion" (p. 118) between students and educators.

In the last chapter, Wong and Chiu outline the implications of their work for research and practice in higher education (for example, rethinking graduate attributes and ways of fostering ideal student characteristics). To increase transparency, the authors also provide readers with three appendices covering information about their methodology, the survey items they used, and a survey analysis breakdown (pp. 131–184). More methodologically adept readers would benefit from additional information concerning the exploratory factor analysis the authors used to test the factorial structure of the eight dimensions (e.g. sideloads) to evaluate the quality of the findings.

In their well-written and clearly structured volume Wong and Chiu summarise valuable data-driven research that sheds light on the important question of what characterises the *ideal student*. Nevertheless, they are aware of potential limitations as there "are concerns about the subjectivity, markers and achievability of the ideal student" (p. 30). We recommend this book to university educators and students as it will help them to reflect critically upon what they expect of, and what is expected in, higher education. Ultimately, the concept of the ideal student "can reduce uncertainties on what it means to be a university student" (p. 30).

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