

Hard work most important for making the 'ideal' university student, study says

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University lecturers rate hard work and enthusiasm at the top the list of characteristics that make the 'ideal' university student, according to new research.

In a paper published in *Educational Review*, a survey of over 1,000 students and staff at British universities and focus groups with 132 members of both these groups, found that academic capability was the least important characteristic for students.

Instead, students and staff rated attributes including 'diligence and engagement' and 'organization and discipline' as most important to get the most out of university.

Dr. Billy Wong, Associate Professor in Widening Participation at the University of Reading said:

"Being intelligent and strategic do not appear to be that important for staff and only moderately more important for students.

"This is surprising, given the extent to which graduates are often judged on their degree results. Universities are also increasingly measured, advertised and ranked by the employment statistics of their graduates, so it is interesting to see that employment skills feature towards the bottom of the ideal list of attributes."

Participants were asked to write down their top five most and least important characteristics of an ideal [student](#). The researchers then asked 1,043 university students and staff across the UK to rate each of the characteristic on a scale of one to five of importance.

The results showed that there are eight dimensions to being the 'ideal student,' and of these characteristics by far the most important dimension valued by both groups was 'diligence and engagement' – reflecting the importance of attributes like a [positive attitude](#) towards learning, a strong work ethic, enthusiasm for a subject, and dedication and effort.

The second most important dimension respected was 'organization and discipline,' including being organised, prepared, punctual and following the rules of the institution.

"Academic skills," "employability skills" and "intelligence and a strategic approach" were ranked in the bottom three by both staff and students. Academic skills refer to assets typically valued and rewarded at university, such as critical thinking, use of statistics, report writing and presentation skills. Employability skills on the other hand include attributes typically valued by employers, including communication, leadership and social skills, as well as work experience and extracurricular activities.

The least rated dimension was "intelligence and a strategic approach," showing that being academically smart, capable and high-achieving was seen as least important overall.

The eight dimensions of what makes an ideal student were chosen, in order, as:

- diligence and engagement
- organization and discipline
- reflection and innovation
- positive and confident outlook
- supportive of others
- [academic skills](#)
- employability skills
- intelligence and strategic approach

However, staff and students differed slightly in their idea of the 'ideal student.' For instance, staff rated employability skills as less important than students. Having a 'positive and confident outlook' was also ranked third by students and sixth by staff, reflecting the greater importance of

mental health and happiness to students.

Dr. Billy Wong said:

"The importance of student happiness and confidence is crucial in efforts to promote better student mental health and wellbeing, especially as demands for university mental health services and counseling have reportedly increased in recent years."

"Our study highlights a discrepancy between staff and students in their perceptions and priorities around student welfare, suggesting it might be beneficial for staff professional development to include training on the role that [staff](#) can play in supporting the welfare of students."

More information: Mapping the eight dimensions of the ideal student in higher education, *Educational Review*, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2021.1909538

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