

The ideal philosophy student: A qualitative study of the transition into first year higher education

Andrea Fransiska Møller Gregersen¹, Institut for Kommunikation, Københavns Universitet

Henriette Tolstrup Holmegaard, Institut for Naturfagenes Didaktik, Københavns Universitet

Abstract

This paper investigates students' transition into a bachelor's programme of philosophy. The aim is to explore the meeting of the norms and expectations of student performances within the study programme and students' identity negotiations when presented with these norms and expectations. Drawing on ideas of identities as performative and recognition practices as central to students' abilities to navigate the norms, the study analyses what is entailed in the constructions of the 'ideal' philosophy students. The analysis builds on data produced through qualitative methods, including interviews, fieldwork and video-diaries. The analysis shows that the 'ideal' philosophy student is expected to demonstrate dedication and an ability to immerse themselves in the content matter, while refraining from becoming absorbed in career prospects. Ideal philosophy identities performed confidence and were able to argue indisputably when engaging in discussions both in and outside teaching. Consequently, insecurity and incompetence were produced as side-effects, with a clear gendered pattern. Implications for higher education are discussed.

Introduction

When students enter higher education (HE), they embark on a journey in which they construct a sense of belonging and thus relate themselves to the values and norms of their subject of study (Holmegaard et al., 2014; Meehan & Howells, 2019). Not all students find this an easy process. Research shows that students from underrepresented, underprivileged and marginalised groups in particular experience a gap between themselves and the cultural setting of HE, which tends to privilege some norms and values, and some ways of studying, over others (Araújo et al., 2014; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Thus, becoming a student entails decoding, navigating and negotiating social norms and values within the specific disciplinary context, and different students face different possibilities when it comes to creating a sense of belonging to their study programme.

In seeking to understand the transition into first-year HE, research argues for the importance of taking the particular disciplinary and cultural context of the study programme into account (Madsen et al., 2015), as even related disciplines convey different norms and expectations to students. This point is also presented in the work of Becher, who shows that the specific academic culture and norms are related to differences between pure and applied disciplines (Becher, 1994).

¹ andregregersen@hum.ku.dk

In this paper, we investigate the study programme in philosophy to understand how the subtle processes of identity negotiations and the in- and exclusions of students interact with the norms and specific expectations of student performances in the study programme. Philosophy is an interesting case, as it is one of the oldest HE subjects (Fink et al., 2003), hence norms, values and practices have been shaped over many years. Furthermore, in philosophy there is a majority of male students, which differs from the gender distribution in most other disciplines within the humanities. The predominance of male students has traditionally been more common within some of the STEM disciplines, for example, physics. Therefore, this paper unfolds the underlying cultural norms within the disciplinary context of philosophy and how these intersect with gender.

Studies of HE have investigated how gender interacts with the subtle processes of becoming a student. Although more women than ever are enrolling in HE (OECD, 2020), gender inequalities cannot be reduced to a question of numbers alone. Students are presented with norms and stereotypical expectations, which establish the conditions and limit the ways that are made available for them to position themselves within the disciplinary context. This affects the ways they can participate and whether or not they are recognised as competent (Carlone & Johnson, 2007; Gonsalves et al., 2016).

This paper unpacks students' transition into the bachelor's programme in philosophy, with a particular focus on gender. It examines the work students engage in when decoding, navigating and negotiating the norms of their programme during the first year.

Research questions

Which norms and values are conveyed through the social and cultural context of the study programme of philosophy, and what is recognised (and what is not) as an 'ideal' student? Which student positions are included and excluded? What are the consequences for students' identity negotiations, in particular related to gender?

Theoretical approach

Every cultural and institutional context has its own logics and expectations of what constitutes proper participation (R. Jenkins, 2014). Social norms of what is recognised as appropriate are developed over time and are continuously produced and negotiated through daily practices, including specific ways of performing oneself, such as dressing and talking (Hasse, 2002; R. Jenkins, 2014). In this paper, we investigate the practices that are recognised as appropriate in the cultural context of a philosophy programme and show how students should perform if they are to live up to the concept of what we describe as 'the ideal philosophy student'. This concept draws attention to the implicit expectations and ideas that constitute an ideal student within a specific context, hence specifying what a student should do and whom they should become (Wong & Chiu, 2020). The dominant norms and ideas create boundaries for the inclusion and exclusion of specific practices and ways of being a student within the particular cultural setting, meaning that some students and student practices may be viewed as being too different or deviant to fit with the dominant norms and ideas (Hasse, 2002). Recognition and non-recognition is crucial for whether or not a student will be perceived as living up to the 'ideal' philosophy student (Avraamidou, 2020).

We are interested in the norms produced within philosophy and how notions of the ideal student and associated valued study practices set the scene for which ways of performing student identities are recognised or not recognised within the programme. We understand identities from a (social)constructivist perspective, meaning that identities are performative, dynamic and continuously negotiated in interaction with the social and cultural

context (Butler, 1999; Holmegaard, 2020; Jenkins, 2014). In order to construct a student identity, it is important to gain recognition from oneself and from meaningful others within the particular context, meaning that performance, recognition practices and demonstrations of competence are intertwined (Carlone & Johnson, 2007). In this respect the identity negotiations and subtle practices of recognition in relation to gender are crucial. We understand gender as performative and thus as something that is continuously produced through everyday practices (Butler, 1999). We are interested in how students of philosophy experience the transition into first year and the negotiations they find themselves engaged in to achieve recognition by others. As such, we are interested in the power dynamics and practices that are maintained, favoured, desired and neglected.

Philosophy as the context of study

The philosophy programme at the University of Copenhagen struggles with issues of student retention and exclusion (Frederiksen & Billesø, 2018). A growing interest in gender, diversity and power relations has dominated recent studies of HE philosophy internationally (Beebee & Saul, 2011; Goddard et al., 2008; Torres González, 2020). One particular focus has been a concern about the curriculum (Beebee & Saul, 2011), which has been criticised for being too 'male' and too 'white' (K. Jenkins, 2014; Ploug, 2020). Others have paid attention to the gender imbalance of students completing an undergraduate degree in philosophy (Thompson et al., 2016) and the limited numbers of women proceeding on to the subject's tenure track (Beebee & Saul, 2011; Conklin et al., 2019; Torres González, 2020). Crouch argues that the respective failures to achieve diversity among students and faculty, as well as in curricula, are interrelated (2012), while Walker draws attention to the 'hidden' curricula of philosophy and to what and who are excluded when certain people, problems and histories are addressed (2005).

This study builds on qualitative data produced at the BA philosophy programme at the University of Copenhagen, a research-intensive university in Denmark. About 65 students are admitted to the Bachelor's in Philosophy at the University of Copenhagen every year, with 30-40 percent of the students being women in the years 2018-2021 (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2022). The Bachelor's programme has a relatively high drop-out rate compared to other programmes at the university (Frederiksen & Billesø, 2018). Furthermore, the programme struggles with high unemployment rates for graduates (Magistrenes A-kasse, 2020).

Method

The analysis in this paper is based on data generated using a variety of qualitative methods. Philosophy students were followed during the transition into their programme, from induction to the beginning of the second semester. The data was produced by the first author.

Participant observation

In order to gain insights into the practices and culture in the philosophy programme, participant observation was conducted in induction week, during teaching and in selected social and extracurricular activities (Spradley, 1980). The main period of observation ran from the first week of the semester to two months into it and counted around forty hours in total. Through observations of everyday interactions between students, teachers and others involved, we acquired insights into the programme's specific practices and culture.

Interviews and video diaries

Five students each agreed to make between three and four video diary recordings during the first eight months of the programme (Danielsson & Berge, 2020). After the last video was viewed by the researchers, all five students were invited to in-depth semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2012), and three were interviewed for two hours each. The video diaries addressed the students' experiences of the programme and their processes of becoming students. The video diaries also informed the interviews, in which some of the themes addressed in the videos were elaborated further. The themes in the interviews covered students' experiences of the programme, including its social and academic aspects.

Mapping workshop

In the beginning of the second semester, a 'mapping workshop' was conducted with the first-year students. The purpose was to generate knowledge about their experiences of the programme's implicit structures, norms and cultures. The workshop lasted one hour and was an interactive group activity in which two groups respectively of three and four students were given the task of 'mapping' their university. The students were asked to make a map of the university and draw and write the norms and practices that they had experienced while discussing their experiences of and perspectives on being students in the programme. Like focus groups (Halkier, 2016), the workshop allowed discussions and negotiations between the students, leading them to describe what they felt to be the norms and practices connected with being a philosophy student. During the process, additional questions were posed by the first author to stimulate further reflections. The outcome of the workshop was two maps and audio recordings of the discussions.

Interview with senior students

A semi-structured group interview (Halkier, 2016) was conducted with the three senior students who were in charge of planning and holding the induction week for the first-year philosophy students. The interview lasted two hours and addressed the themes of planning and reflecting on the induction, the senior students' own experiences of being philosophy students and the norms and expectations they experienced when entering the programme.

Analytical approach

Field notes taken during observations were subsequently written into full notes (O'Reilly, 2008), and audio files from the interviews and the mapping workshop were transcribed verbatim (Bryman, 2012). All students were anonymised to conceal their names and personal characteristics. An equal representation of male and female students participated in the interviews, video diaries and workshops. However, in order to maintain a degree of anonymisation of the participating students, we will not provide further details. The study follows the ethical guidelines of the Humanities at the University of Copenhagen (Research Ethics Committee, 2022).

Inspired by the thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) we began the first phase of analysing data by *familiarising ourselves with the data* by reading and rereading them and identifying initial themes. Then we used a focused approach driven by the theoretical framework and the overall aims. Our theoretical approach was operationalised into analytical questions to guide the coding process (Søndergaard, 2006). The questions were:

- What are considered to be the most appropriate ways of performing student identities (e.g. ways of talking, acting, interacting, dressing, as well as engagement and interest) within the context of the philosophy programme?
- How do students navigate and negotiate what is thus recognised?
- In what ways are recognised and non-recognised student performances gendered?

We identified situations throughout the data in which the norms and practices associated with the 'ideal student' were expressed and negotiated by the students. Thus, we analysed which performances the students ascribed to being a 'good' student, for example, including when they indicated that 'this is the right way' or when specific performances were dismissed as wrong or were disparaged. We also identified themes in the material where students either expressed the view that they did not fit in, or implied that what they did was not good enough or right. We also looked for gendered practices, patterns in respect of whom and what were recognised and whether the exclusions were related to gender.

Results

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis: dedication and interest; positioning and active engagement; showing knowledge and confidence; and gendered positions and negotiations.

Dedication and interest in philosophy in its own right

A main theme in the thematic analysis was the importance of showing an interest in the content of the programme. In the workshop discussion, one student explained how unpopular it would be to say: 'I really think that Aristotle is crap; I don't find him interesting at all'. The two other students agreed and described how there would be immediate social shaming, with accusations like 'How dare you?!' if you admitted that you found the content boring or irrelevant. Similarly, in another group, one student said: 'You're not really good at philosophy until you can see something interesting in everything'. Hence, the students expressed the view that the ideal philosophy student is able to express a genuine interest in the programme's content. Consequently, it became challenging to position oneself as having other interests, having doubts about the programme or finding the content irrelevant. This is similar to Johansson's descriptions of how acquiring recognition as a physics student not only requires conveying one's competence or intelligence, but also portraying the right kind of attachment (Johansson, 2018). Within philosophy, it was crucial to perform a similar sense of dedication in order to position oneself as an ideal student. Some students also described how being 'nerdy' and 'going all in' to the content were highly valued.

The emphasis on showing a genuine interest in the content was also evident in the way the students related themselves to potential job prospects. During induction, the students were introduced to the programme by teachers, senior students and administrative staff. After a presentation by a teacher, there was an informal Q&A session about jobs after graduation. One senior student described how philosophy students must prepare to be met repeatedly with the 'What can you become after completing the programme?' question. He continued, 'You can also refuse to accept the premise, and instead talk about what [philosophy content] you are going to work with' (field notes). This phrasing highlights the content of the programme rather than any specific job one might do afterwards. Narratives about the likelihood of unemployment after graduation were presented to the students from the very first days of their study start. In the workshop, the students emphasised that there are 'high expectations regarding your academic ambitions, but not your career ambitions'. In one video diary, the

student characterised his approach to philosophy as different from the norm because he was more interested in seeing it in its social context than in studying one author in depth. By encouraging first-year students to resist answering questions about jobs after graduation, it is implied that the ideal philosophy student's aspirations should lie in the content of and an interest in philosophy itself, rather than its possible applications and career goals. Philosophy can be described as a 'pure' discipline which entails a focus on research and knowledge in their own right and is not structured around the application of knowledge (Biglan, 1973). The implied expectations of this dedication and interest leave limited space for students who have other aspirations and interests than philosophy in itself or have different approaches to being a philosophy student. One student explained that she found herself to be different from the majority in this respect:

A lot of the philosophy students here, they are like *really* philosophy students – they incorporate it in *everything* they do. There are not many who, like, say "Well, this is not what I'm going to devote my life to." [...] For me philosophy is not my life at all – I find it interesting, but I'm very much at peace with it, and I can stand up for myself and be, like, this is what I feel like. And I think that there are other things that are interesting too.

In this case, having other interests outside philosophy is ascribed meaning as something different from being a real or ideal student. This has consequences for those students who are challenged in integrating life within the university with life outside it. This recalls Avraamidou's work (2020) showing how the process of becoming an academic person may support, hinder or potentially cause conflicts between the same person's different identities. The ideal of devotion requires students to sacrifice other identities and attachments that are considered incompatible with philosophy in order to be fully recognised as philosophy students. Thus, students' lives outside philosophy easily become an obstacle to the process of becoming fully recognised as philosophy students. The student in the above quote felt challenged because she could not devote herself fully to philosophy. However, she managed to find a way to navigate this dilemma by being able to justify the fact that philosophy was not her only desire in life.

Position yourself and discuss like a philosopher

Although it is important to be dedicated and to be able to see what is interesting in every part of philosophy, our data shows that it is equally important that the students position themselves in relation to two main theoretical traditions: the analytic and the continental philosophy (Friedman, 2000). In our data, this division of theoretical traditions was presented in a sketch in a revue, in which a group of philosophy students planned and performed humorous sketches for other philosophy students. In this case, one student acted as a counsellor who interviewed potential students about what type of philosophy they aspired to follow. The two traditions were clearly distinguished, and the joke in the sketch lay not only in the way the traditions were performed, but also in the clearly more positive greeting of the student who aspired to follow one of the traditions rather than the other (field notes). Similarly, in one of the workshop groups, the students also emphasised the importance of showing an interest in the 'right' subjects or authors and of taking a stance. There is an embedded expectation that the students should already be able to position themselves within these traditions in the first year, even before having been properly introduced to the traditions in the courses (Gregersen et al., 2021). However, this is not a formal requirement, but rather something that is produced in the programme's culture. An example of this was when a teacher with a glint in his eyes said that he did not know what 'phenomenological' means, but he thought it had to do with feeling something, thereby indicating that this type of philosophy was not as interesting or important as the tradition he taught (field notes). This was then reproduced by the students, who

expected their fellow students to position themselves accordingly. In an interview, one senior student described the game of positioning by comparing it to two fiercely rival football teams in Denmark and explained that it is 'easier just to put on a fan's shirt from one team than to refuse to take a stand'. To perform the ideal student, you should demonstrate your dedication to philosophy, as well as to a tradition, by choosing a side and being able to argue in its favour.

From the beginning of their study, teachers encourage the students to engage in discussions and students are told that attending 'the Friday bar [in the programme] counts as active participation, because you discuss philosophy' (field notes). This is closely linked to the idea of philosophy penetrating all areas of life, since even social activities are dominated by a focus on the disciplinary content, as has been shown in previous research (Gregersen et al., 2021).

Although the process of learning within the discipline entails engaging in academic discussions, the culture of discussion can be very harsh and not inclusive of all students. Exclusion mechanisms and discrimination towards women in particular, but also towards other minorities, is a well-known problem within the field of philosophy, and the hostile environment causes some students to leave (Haslanger, 2008). The expectation is that 'a successful philosopher should look and act like a (traditional, white) man' (Haslanger, 2008, p. 212). However, this masculine culture also challenges the identities of some male students. In an interview, one of the students who was struggling to find his place in the programme explained that in high school he was actively engaged in classes, but in the philosophy programme at university he found himself refraining from participating. He described how he rarely raised his hand to participate, and he had not yet signed up to do a presentation. He explained with frustration that he experienced himself being 'so passive, and I blame myself for it'; he continued that he felt like a 'parenthesis in some of the dynamics'. He was ambivalent because his way of performing student identities was not concordant with the ideal student, as he was aware that the norms prescribed a more active performance as a student, a performance he felt his earlier self had been able to exercise. He had trouble finding his position in the social dynamics of the programme, and he explained that he felt 'unsure of [his] role.' He continued that 'speaking out is intimidating and positioning yourself independently of others is intimidating and frightening'. Moreover, he did not feel any sense of belonging to a social group, and he would feel more 'motivated to say something if it were only the people I talk with who were in the room'. The process of silencing was something he reflected on and a position he clearly felt uncomfortable with. He described a groupwork situation in which he felt that his peers had misinterpreted him and accused him of not having independent arguments, and even of taking other students' ideas and claiming them as his own. This was not aligned with his own self-image. He felt that this misconception might be caused by his lack of participation. Hence, passiveness was reproduced in his case because these social interactions caused him to refrain from participating, and he was boxed into this marginal position, although he disliked it and knew it was not aligned with the ideal. Despite being able to describe the norms and ideal ways of performing student identities, he could not compromise himself and satisfy the norms without feeling intimidated.

In the culture of the programme, what are recognised as ideal student practices affect not only a student's ability to be acknowledged by fellow students, but as this example shows, they are also linked to the student's engagement in class, and thus the student's learning opportunities.

Know your shit

One space in which the norms regarding active engagement and positioning oneself were particularly at work was the student-led Filosofisk Studenter Kollokvium (FSK), a forum hosting events at which students present a

philosophical subject followed by a peer discussion. In the workshop, a group of first-year students discussed the culture and expectations at work at FSK and explained that there are specific norms there for how to talk because it is 'an arena' with 'a social game going on,' and it is important to show one's peers that 'I know my shit' and 'how able I am philosophically'. One student said that 'I *really* think carefully about how I express myself,' while another added, 'Yeah, you really have to have balls to say something'. In principle, all students can volunteer to do a presentation and can join in the discussion, but the 'social game' was portrayed as intimidating and as demanding courage, or 'balls', because there are certain norms for how to participate. The group continued talking about one of their peers who discussed things in very 'absolute' and 'stubborn' ways. One student described how it made her 'opt out if [she] talks to someone who does not want to change their opinion,' and that it makes her doubt herself and think 'Well, then you must have figured something out that I have not figured out yet'. Another student explained that in previous educational contexts she had shared her difficulties with fellow students as a way of connecting, but in the context of this philosophy programme she had 'learned that you should keep it to yourself' and that it 'is not accepted so well to do that in this programme'. Her experience was that there was always someone who knew the answer; hence she ended up being positioned as not capable of understanding the content when she shared her doubts with her peers. As a result, she ended up feeling more excluded than included in the community of the programme.

Thus, the programme's culture rewards and recognises the knowledgeable and the confident, while misrecognising the insecure and the ignorant. Negative experiences like these can cause a feeling of not fitting in or belonging to the culture (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020), as well as producing and enhancing insecurities concerning competence and making the student hesitate or refrain from participation in future situations that might arise within the programme (Carlone & Johnson, 2007).

Whereas women are more often perceived as demonstrating less self-esteem and confidence than men, men are perceived to overestimate their abilities compared to women, even when they show equal abilities (Torres-Guijarro & Bengoechea, 2017). These gendered patterns of how men and women position themselves and are positioned by others, and differences in the performance of confidence might play a role in who chooses to participate in philosophical discussions, as the programme's norms prescribe a performance that shows confidence rather than insecurity.

The students involved in the FSK organisation said that very few female students sign up to present. As already noted, the philosophical discussions in the programme tend to privilege ways of participating in which the student performs confidently and knowledgeably. The issue with the lack of female presenters is very likely related to the expectations regarding how to perform.

Gendered strategies and negotiations

More subtle gendered mechanisms of exclusion were also present. One student had realised that she could use her voice strategically to gain recognition and explained that 'You should preferably formulate yourself a bit like a man' and avoid 'formulating yourself as very feminine'. She continued: 'You are heard more if you make your voice sound deeper, and if you speak more slowly and articulate [your words] very clearly'. Since entering the philosophy programme, she had become 'very aware of [her] body language'. One male student responded to the female student's explanation with surprise, claiming that what she had described was just the norm in intellectual conversations. Traditionally, a deep and low-pitched male voice is associated with authority and courage, whereas a high-pitched female voice is associated with the absence of these (Beard, 2017). We are socialised not to hear authority in the female voice (ibid.). At all events, the female student had decoded the

norms and worked out how she could navigate them to gain more recognition as a philosophy student. Based on research done within a physics programme Johansson (2018) argues that some students receive implicit affirmations of their position, and that they 'are recognized and recognize themselves as doing an appropriate and undeniably valued kind of physics and therefore do not need to negotiate their position as physicists as much as others' (Johansson, 2018, p. 2433). Similar dynamics are played out in the philosophy programme where female philosophy students, have to engage in more identity work (than their male peers) to be able to negotiate their position as philosophy students, and one way of doing this is by strategically changing the way they talk and act. Another way of negotiating the available identities in a culture in which female students are in the minority is by becoming more visible. One student explained that, since women are so few, she wanted to emphasise that she is one of them, saying: 'I'm goddamn gonna wear red lipstick'. This can be understood as a way of working around what Faulkner (2009) terms the (in)visibility paradox and 'the dilemma of difference'. As a consequence of the majority of philosophy students being men, a congruence has been established between the 'real philosopher' and the man. This explains why in philosophy women as a group are obliged to downplay their identities as 'real women' (Calhoun, 2009), for example, by dressing in less feminine ways, if they want to be recognised as 'real philosophers'. The student above strategically uses red lipstick, something that can be viewed as a traditionally female form of expression, as a reaction to female students being fewer and therefore having to 'position their gender identities in relation to the hegemonic masculinity/ies operating in their community' (Faulkner, 2009, p. 179). By wearing lipstick and dressing in a more 'girly' fashion, the student has found a way of insisting on her right to be both a philosophy student *and* a woman.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the expectations and ideals students are met with when entering higher education. The paper shows that what is recognised as an ideal student within a study context has consequences for the subtle inclusion and exclusion of certain performances and for whether the students need to negotiate their positions within that context. The paper contributes with knowledge on how these processes takes place in higher education. Looking specifically at the social and cultural context of a philosophy programme, the paper also contributes with knowledge on the particular norms and what is included and excluded. Research on the study of philosophy has focused particularly on the lack of diversity in respect of demography and representation in curricula (Beebe & Saul, 2011; Ploug, 2020; Thompson et al., 2016; Torres González, 2020). Thus, this paper extends existing knowledge by analysing the norms and values embedded in the philosophy programme and how they interact with performances of the student identities that are recognised as ideal, and those which are not. This paper has investigated the production of the subtle inclusions and exclusions in students' daily practices during the transition into the first year and the consequences for student negotiations, in particular in relation to gender. Thus, the paper further contributes to research on HE transitions.

Performing the ideal philosophy student

The analysis showed that participating and engaging with dedication in discussions was key to being recognised as an ideal philosophy student. According to our findings a dedicated philosophy student showed an ability to find an interest in all aspects of philosophy. Ideal students were expected to engage in and express a genuine interest in philosophy, as well as treat it like a lifestyle. However, the analysis also showed how ideal students were expected not to strive to apply philosophy to everyday life situations, nor be too focused on potential job prospects. Students were thus required to submit themselves to desiring philosophy in its own right and dedicating themselves *fully* in order to live up to the ideal. Finally, the students were expected to perform as

being confident and knowledgeable when engaging in discussions and to position themselves in relation to two traditions within the discipline, despite not yet having been fully introduced to them.

The construction of the ideal philosophy student establishes the conditions for which practices are recognised and those which are not, and thus for students' identity work. Firstly, the masculine culture of rather harsh and upfront discussions allows limited space for sharing insecurities, doubts and exposing the challenges encountered in the transition into the programme. For some students, this resulted in passivity and self-silencing, enforced a feeling of not fitting in and a reluctance to participate in discussions. Sharing one's insecurities risked being interpreted as individual deficits. These subtle mechanisms of exclusion posed difficulties for some students in constructing viable identities as philosophy students when they lacked confidence in presenting philosophical arguments in teaching or in discussion with peers. Harazi et al. (2020) point out that the feeling of non-ordinariness is related to being challenged in gaining a sense of belonging, as well as in enforcing a feeling of being incompetent. For example, women in male-dominated programmes have to engage in exceptional identity work and improvise, compromise or fragment themselves in order to gain and maintain a student identity and to be seen as performing competence in the subject (Hazari et al., 2020). Our analysis showed that a masculine culture instilled feelings of insecurity and incompetence in some students, particularly in women, who were a minority in the first-year cohort. While it was clear that several female students were challenged by the masculine culture and ideals, the data showed that some male students were challenged as well. Students' sense of belonging and the feeling of fitting in is important for their willingness to stay in the programme (Tinto, 2015), thus when the masculine culture challenges students and their possibilities for living up to the ideals it might also affect their willingness to stay.

Secondly, the emphasis on philosophy as a pure discipline (Biglan, 1973) makes students refrain from relating what they learn to the outside world. One example is how first-year students were encouraged to ignore the high unemployment rates and instead were expected to immerse themselves in the programme and its content. Other research shows that students from working-class backgrounds tend to be risk-averse and more focused on job security, hence value applicability over abstraction and theory, compared to students from more privileged backgrounds (Thomsen et al., 2013). Hence, philosophy supports a rather privileged position when focusing on philosophy for 'its own sake' instead of its applicability and job prospects, thereby potentially excluding some students.

Thirdly, to position themselves as ideal students some students managed to strategically negotiate their identities, for example, women talking and acting in more masculine ways, such as deepening their voices, whereas other students ended up developing passive practices whereby they refrained from actively participating in the programme. This is a problem for those students who refrain from participating and are thereby prevented from being active participants, since active participation supports deep learning (von Glasersfeld, 1995). Moreover, this is a problem for the study programme as it does not benefit from the potential diversity of its student cohorts. However, challenges to diversity are often reduced to a problem of attracting students, rather than reforming programmes to allow more space for diversity: 'the more privileged, elitist and hierarchical the arena, the more resistance to democratizing developments one might expect to find' (Leicester 1993, as cited in: Morley, 1997). Differences, disagreements and diverse voices enhance and drive reforms and change (McArthur, 2010). However, without reforms and change, it is hard to enhance diversity. If philosophy and other programmes want to enhance diversity, the first step is not to implement new recruitment strategies, but to interrogate own norms, values and practices.

Our findings contribute to understanding the culture and subtle inclusions and exclusions associated with the discipline of philosophy and add to the broader HE literature. In all academic communities, disciplinary norms, values and ideals delineate what and who are included or excluded. Research on how these processes unfold and are experienced by students provides a better understanding of, for example, why some students participate actively in academic activities and others do not. Moreover, this type of analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how inequalities in general and gendered inequalities in particular are played out, and of the processes that cause students to feel that they do not belong, which can potentially lead to dropout.

The paper thus contributes to a deepened understanding of how disciplines and disciplinary norms and ideals are negotiated in practice and how the processes of inclusion and exclusion work. While the paper contributes with knowledge about the discipline and culture of philosophy in particular, the theoretical and methodological approach can also be used to study other fields and disciplinary cultures and thereby expose their specific ideals and processes of inclusion and exclusion.

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