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Supporting High-Achieving Students After Enrolment: Learning from a Qualitative Evaluation of a High Achievers Recognition Scheme

ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a small-scale qualitative study of student perceptions of a High Achievers' Recognition Scheme in a faculty within a UK university. This scheme is unusual in UK higher education in that it provides tailored support and development for students who have been identified as high-achievers. The findings suggest students valued both the recognition and developmental aspects of the scheme and their perceptions of the benefits aligned with the scheme's aims: enhanced personal and professional development, improved engagement, and raised aspirations. Social and individual factors were perceived to enable high-achievement, whilst some operational factors could hinder engagement with the scheme. The findings are relevant to wider understandings of approaches to support high-achieving students; an area where, currently, there is little published research from the UK. We conclude with reflections on possible ways to build support for high-achieving students through focusing on identity, agency, and community.

KEYWORDS

high achievement, student success, student support, qualitative, evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Research has identified many of the factors associated with student underachievement and poor completion rates in higher education (HE) ranging from poor course matching or limited academic experience, to financial and personal challenges or lack of social integration (Kauser et al. 2021; Thomas 2012). It is similarly unequivocal about some of the measures that higher education institutions (HEIs) should put in place if they wish to improve attainment and maximise their retention rates (Yorke and Longden 2008). Promoting high(er) levels of engagement amongst students and fostering a strong sense of belonging or identity are considered key components in this regard (Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017). Against this background, a great deal of effort is made to support students deemed to be struggling with the structures of academic work at the degree level. In contrast, relatively little activity, in the UK at least, has focussed on the support that high-achieving students can benefit from during their studies (University of Surrey 2012).

One of the most well-known international models for supporting high-achieving students is the honors program or college, employed widely in the USA (Schuman 2006) since the early twentieth century, and more recently in China (Kitigaki and Li 2012), the Netherlands, Scandinavia (Wolfensberger and Hogenstijn 2016), and Mexico (Khan and Morales-Mendenez 2012). This catch-all

phrase actually covers a diverse range of structures, content, and processes, but they tend to be curriculum focused interventions. For instance, Schuman (2006, 33) describes four types of honors courses in the USA comprising those with "honors sections of regular courses," "enriched options within regular courses," "special honors courses" and "honors projects." Elsewhere, he recommends honors requirements make up 20–25% of undergraduate students work (Schuman 2006). In addition to honors schemes, there are also examples internationally of co- and extra- curricular interventions which emphasise the development of the whole student (Dickinson and Dickinson 2015; Johnson, Walther, and Medley 2018). In the UK, institutional activities that target high-achieving students tend to be concerned with recruitment, outreach, and supporting high-achieving students in schools and the Further Education sector to make the transition into HE (Fuller, Heath, and Johnston 2011). Rather less attention has been paid to the needs of high-achievers once they arrive in HE (Trowler and Trowler 2010). High-achieving students may, of course, engage with local extra-curricular opportunities, but institution-wide developmental schemes for these students appear to be less common. Many institutions have research focused schemes for undergraduates but only a small number have institution wide schemes with a broader remit, for example, the University of Winchester's Scholars Scheme[1], the University of Surrey's Top Achievers Recognised and Supported[2], and University College Cork's Quercus Talented Students' Scheme[3].

Research on how best to support high-achievers in the UK often stems from the schools' sector (O'Mahony, Thomas, and Payens 2013; White, Fletcher-Campbell, and Ridley 2006) and suggests the development of self-efficacy and confidence, high expectations from teaching staff, the stimulation and challenge of working with similarly highly-motivated and capable individuals, alongside opportunities to excel in co-curricular activities and individual character traits such as determination and ambition may all play their part in getting the best out of high-achieving students.

The High Achievers' Recognition Scheme (HARS)

The establishment of the HARS was part of a wider piece of work in a faculty which includes health, life sciences, and education disciplines. This work focused on promoting professional ambitions, growth mindsets, self-confidence, and efficacy amongst students through celebratory processes and experiences which prioritise students' assets, abilities, and successes. It included normalising commendations and prizes for outstanding course level performance as well as developing an automated means of offering individual recognition for peaks of attainment for any student. It was against this backdrop that the HARS was created to acknowledge and develop those students whose academic performance is consistently very good, not just in one or two modules but across their courses. The HARS was borne out of debates amongst academic and student support staff in the faculty about the lack of engagement of high-achieving students with academic skills development. Anecdotes suggested this was because most students saw the service as predominantly remedial in nature. Staff, in contrast, felt that there was much they could offer academically successful students who were interested in becoming even more successful. These debates coincided with a presentation by the University of Surrey who had introduced a scheme for their high-achieving students, offering support to secure even higher grades and personal and inter-personal development (University of Surrey 2012). Faculty staff were keen to explore how this approach could be adapted and tailored to suit the faculty's socially and culturally diverse student population; with high proportions of "commuter students" in an urban, "widening participation" institutional context. The overarching aims for the scheme relate to students'

personal, academic, and professional development (linking to employability) and inclusivity; they recognise that high-achieving students may have specific support needs. Whilst it did not inform the design of the scheme, the specific needs of high-achieving students have been identified elsewhere (Johnson, Walther, and Medley 2018). The scheme aims to inspire a sense of pride in the institution and its students and should be viewed in context as one part of the faculty's drive to widen participation and promote student achievement and success. Other initiatives include student letters of commendation and faculty awards, as well as departmental inclusive practices and blended learning fellows, alongside universal student and personal tutor access to dispositions for success scales (Egan et al. 2021).

Within the HARS, a high-achiever is a student who is good at passing assessed tasks, whether academic or professional, with access to the scheme determined (in the majority of cases) by grades. However, we were determined to avoid the trap of reinforcing historical socio-economic advantages and disadvantages. In response to our student diversity therefore, the scheme uses an "academic distance travelled" metric alongside the standard end-of-year average scores and referrals to guide students to a range of co-curricular enhancement opportunities. Our view is that every student matters and high-achieving students are entitled to and will benefit from being stretched still further. The "distance travelled" route captures students whose entry qualifications were lower than the university's usual required points but who perform well in their academic assignments and/or placements once enrolled. It is likely that there will be students in the faculty who might be described as talented or gifted but whose grades and entry points profile mean that they do not come into the scope of this scheme, and there are parallel means of recognising achievements in other aspects of students' lives. The approach is proactive, inviting students to nominate themselves (or a peer) if they feel they would benefit from participation with the final decision being made following a meeting with the Academic Lead for the scheme. In the first year of the scheme, 2015–16, the response was unprecedented; over 90% of students contacted indicated they wished to participate and by the end of the first year, 225 of the 537 eligible students had registered with the scheme. By the end of January 2017 there were 743 students eligible to take part in the scheme.

Figure 1. Visual model of routes into and themed offer of the HARS
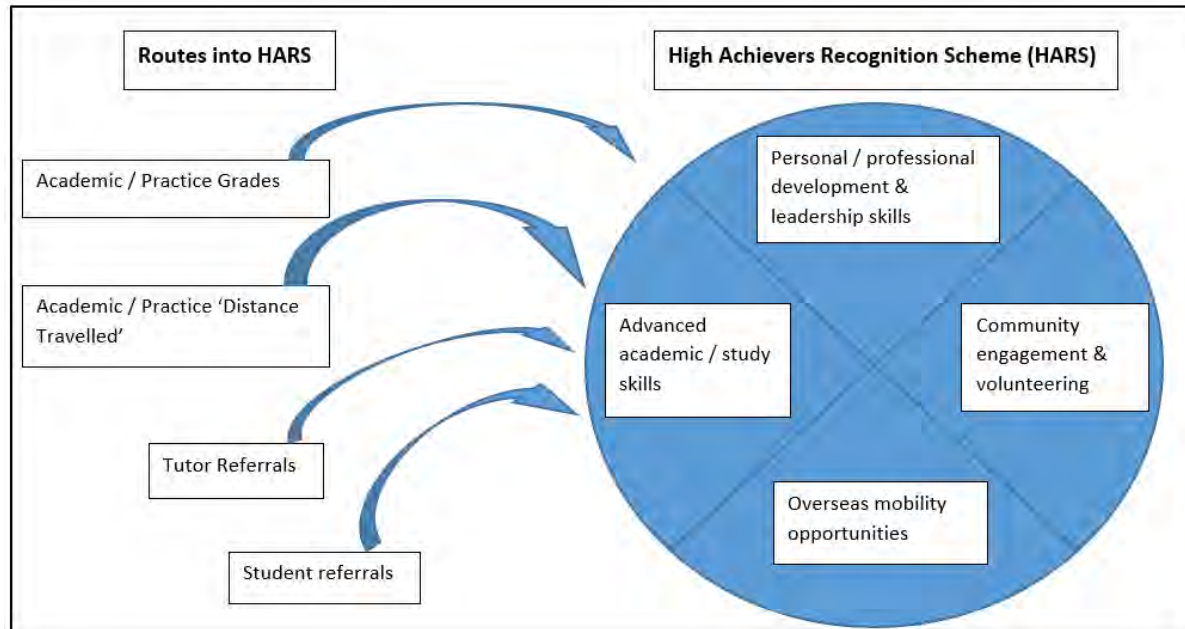
Since 2017/18, those eligible are invited to a launch event and are then required to complete an application form if they wish to step into the programme. Once registered all students complete an online profiling questionnaire, the results of which are used to inform a one-to-one interview with a careers coach to establish which aspects of the scheme they are most interested in. Following this, students are able to access a range of co-curricular enhancement activities grouped into four tracks: advanced academic skills; leadership; community engagement; and international mobility (see Figure 1). These enhancement activities include face-to-face seminars and workshops, individual tutorials, bespoke appointments, and guest speaker talks, alongside launch and celebratory events to bring students together. The coaching and advising approach is deliberate, as more prescriptive one-size-fits-all models seemed unlikely to work and have been rejected by other universities internationally with longer traditions of investing in "honours" students (Carduner, Padak, and Reynolds 2011). Although this shift in approach has seen slightly lower numbers of students involved in the scheme, those involved have higher levels of engagement. In this context, engagement is framed as participation in HARS activities.

Building the scheme surfaced some conflicting worldviews amongst staff as to the meaning of the term widening participation. For many staff and students, including the scheme's organisers, the starting point was one of "every student matters" and that meant considering the needs of high-achievers as well as those who are finding the transition into HE much harder. For others, the notion of offering additional support for students that had done well seemed counter-intuitive. To paraphrase, why direct any resource to such students when they were already performing well and securing good outcomes? Concerns were raised, for example, that the scheme would suck resources away from support services for the most vulnerable students and/or that it would favour students who were already advantaged in terms of their prior educational experiences and outcomes. In response, and in the interests of promoting evidence-based practices, care was taken throughout to monitor participation in the scheme and to

ensure that the faculty's demographic diversity was fairly represented amongst HARS students. In addition, at no point were resources withdrawn from groups such as academic study support teams in order to facilitate HARS. The resource allocated to HARS was additional to the existing student support investment which continues to be many times the size of the HARS investment.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

A small-scale qualitative evaluation was undertaken, involving one-to-one interviews with seven students who had participated in the HARS (six by telephone and one face-to-face). The evaluation aimed to explore how HARS is experienced by students and to provide in-depth insight into the factors associated with their engagement and their ideas for how the scheme could be further enhanced to benefit themselves and future students. The interviews were exploratory and semi-structured (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011) with strength-based questions informed by appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2003). In keeping with the supportive ethos of the scheme, this approach explicitly values individual experiences and perspectives and engages participants in co-creating recommendations for the future. The interview questions prompted participants to describe their understanding of high-achievement, high points in their academic and professional development, their response to being invited to participate in the HARS, what they have valued and found challenging, and their ideas for improvement.

An initial targeted sample of students registered with the scheme (checking this reflected the overall demographic make-up of the wider student cohort) were sent personal e-mail invitations to participate in the evaluation. As none came forward, an open invitation to participate was shared at the 2017 HARS launch event, and the HARS team reminded students in face-to-face and e-mail interactions. Five women and two men participated: four from health-related disciplines; two from social-care; and one from a course that spanned education and social-care. Participants were at different levels of study, and different points in their involvement with the HARS when the interviews took place. Some had just applied to participate following the launch event, others had attended multiple HARS activities. The fact that students were at different points in the process enabled a breadth of different student experiences to inform our study. Three participants were interviewed in June 2017, and four in November 2017. To mitigate any concerns about students being interviewed by staff who were involved directly in the management and delivery of HARS activities, the interviews and analysis were conducted by an external researcher (Flint).

Interviews were recorded, and transcripts were analysed iteratively and thematically; they were analysed first through open-coding, then grouping and refining codes into themes. Finally these themes were used to explore our research questions:

- Why do students choose to engage with HARS?
- How do students perceive HARS in the context of wider strategies for their academic achievement/development?
- Are there perceived benefits of engaging with HARS?
- Do students feel HARS could be improved/developed? And if so, how?

We hoped that participation would benefit students through providing them an opportunity to reflect on their achievement and professional development, and to contribute to the development of the HARS.

Given the focus on the particularity of participants' experiences, the findings are not taken to represent the views of all participants in the HARS or indeed all high-achieving students, rather they provide insight into the ways individual high-achieving students may experience such schemes. These may provide useful starting points for those reflecting on how to support high-achieving students in their own contexts.

FINDINGS

It is not possible within the scope of this article to explore all aspects of the data, therefore we have focused on those which struck us as most useful in reflecting on how best to support the academic and professional success of high-achieving students through schemes like the HARS. In this section we highlight some of the perceived barriers to, enablers, and impacts of high-achievement, in particular, those associated with emotion and identity.

Defining high-achievement

Although the scheme used grades (academic and on placement) as selection criteria, participants held holistic views of what high-achievement might mean more generally. For many, this included the scheme's criteria:

> Initially, as it was described to me, it was a student who got a first […] And then, once I was on the course, then obviously became aware it was also other students who had shown, like, improvement or promise. (Student 3)

The sense of making a contribution and being a "role model" for other students was inherent in some participants' comments. Here high-achievement was perceived as including engagement with formal extra-curricular activities through the students' union (leading a student society, being a student representative), volunteering and charity work, and being a student ambassador on open days. It could also involve informal activities, such as supporting peers, interacting with the public on placements, and commitments that students have outside of their studies.

> So somebody who maybe has outside activities, has commitments outside of university, but also gets engaged in university life and, you know, possibly even involved in student unions and things like that […] kind of showing you're proud to be part of the university as well because I think that will kind of draw into being high-achieving in terms of, you know, you're…you're giving back what you're getting from the uni as well. (Student 7)

This holistic view was reflected in participants' examples of high-point experiences, which included activities such as: part-time employment related to their subject; voluntary and community work and projects; and HARS activities. Some participants' descriptions of their high-point experiences highlighted the relationship between high-achievement and recognition of their developing professional identity, informed by both academic and practical experiences.

Participants described the qualities, behaviours, and attributes of high-achieving students as: hard-working; dedicated; and having high intelligence, ability, skills, and aspirations (summarised in Figure 2).

Figure 2. Word-cloud of perceived qualities of high-achieving students drawn from respondents' comments

Enabling factors

Factors participants described as enabling high-achievement tended to be personal and social/relational. Some stressed the importance of students' own behaviour and attitudes; foregrounding being open and proactive, and taking ownership of their engagement. The most commonly mentioned social/relational factor was the supportiveness and approachability of staff.

> […] the one thing that was in common was that the staff were willing to kind of give me that leg-up, give me that time to…just to help me develop and to help me and to grow in confidence really. So I think it's…I think the dedication of the staff that I've encountered in those opportunities to kind of grow throughout. (Student 2)

When reflecting on their wider high-achievement and high-point experiences, however, participants also mentioned being part of a supportive community of peers, and the support of family, professional colleagues, and clients on placements: "Like other students on the placement as well. Because if you were unsure about how to do something and they'd already done it, they were quite good about being 'Oh, I'll show you'" (Student 5).

Other enabling factors included having clear information about what HARS offered, receiving tailored advice that considered their aspirations holistically, the accessibility and flexibility of the scheme, and simply having the opportunity to participate.

Due to the varied levels of engagement with the scheme and the qualitative focus of this study, it is not possible to draw conclusions around which activities were most/least valued. However, participants were positive about the scheme overall. Where specific activities and elements were mentioned, these included: the launch event; careers support; sessions on specific skills (presentations, critical analysis, coaching and management); external speakers; 1-2-1 tutoring; working in small groups; and developing self-knowledge and applying that in practice.

Challenges

In contrast, the factors which participants described as presenting challenges to their engagement with the HARS tended to be practical and operational. Time was an issue, in terms of timetabling clashes, the temporal "flow" of elements of the scheme, and managing multiple demands on their time:

> I think the biggest thing is when they're available, like the timescales when you…when you're studying it's difficult adding all these extras even though you know it's going to do you well, you know, you've got to focus on your assignments. (Student 1)

As many students within the faculty have a professional practice element of their course, some participants described the challenges of negotiating time off to attend HARS sessions. There were clearly differences and challenges around how participants prioritised time to balance the demands of academic assignments, placements, and engagement with the HARS.

> So I had to negotiate with my department to explain to them that I was taking time off to do it and sort of juggle things around…so sometimes it was difficult and, you know, I've lost a few ticks on my attendance record but I thought it was all worthwhile because I really wanted to attend those sessions. (Student 3)

Some participants felt that a shift in the nature of the HARS (to require students to engage with HARS activities to retain their status) potentially excluded some students who may be unable to attend sessions and undermined celebratory aspects of the scheme: "It's no longer – well done, you've done well – it's more like well done, now we expect more from you" (Student 4).

> I think though, I understand why they've now got the kind of inclusion criteria where you have to do certain workshops to be part of it […] I do think it's a bit off-putting to people. It does make it difficult for people like me, you know. I thought "well I can't be in this scheme because I can't do that." And when I did speak to [staff name] they said, you know, "we will try and find a way around it. I'd rather have someone who clearly wants to do the scheme." (Student 7)

Another challenge was communication. Some participants described feelings of confusion or being overwhelmed with information following the HARS launch event. This led to initial reluctance to engage with the scheme. However, those who had attended two launch events, described the most recent as giving much clearer information.

The impact of engaging in the HARS

The perceived impacts of engaging with the scheme can be grouped into three themes:

- Personal development: self-improvement (including the development of academic skills); self-knowledge and becoming more reflective; confidence; and making connections across their learning experiences.

> It's very good, it's very useful to actually look back on all of this through the different HARS activities and put those into perspective and actually tease out all of my strengths and weaknesses more, my skills, and learn more about myself retrospectively, and then sort of take that to where I was now and improving my skills […] it's an ongoing process, so it's useful and part of our course in a way is to be self-reflective, but this is really taking in onto a whole new level and giving me lots of, lots of new skills. (Student 3)

- Professional development: career prospects; developing skills, knowledge and experiences relevant to career aspirations; providing evidence and experiences to include on CVs and discuss in interviews; and inspiring professional aspirations: "You think 'I'm quite kind of pigeon-holed with my path set out.' Whereas actually there's a lot more opportunities you don't realise, you don't think your career can take you in the direction, sometimes it can" (Student 7).

- Affective engagement: positive emotions such as pride, happiness and excitement associated with the HARS; leading to increased enthusiasm and motivation.

> I was just really proud. […] when you've been trying really hard and I had been throwing myself into it. Putting my head down. So It's just nice to have a bit of recognition. It just makes you feel proud of yourself, I guess. (Student 4)

Becoming and being a high-achieving student

Interestingly, for some participants this was the second time they had been invited to participate in the scheme. Reasons for their previous lack of engagement related to already having a lot of extra-curricular commitments and feeling confused or unclear about the nature of the scheme and what it involved.

When asked to recall their reaction to receiving their HARS invitation, some articulated a complex emotional journey and not all immediately identified as high-achievers. For example, one student moved from disbelief, to feeling overwhelmed, through acceptance, to feeling proud of their status.

> A bit overwhelming, really, at first. I think most students, including myself, was a bit sort of…we didn't believe it was happening. We were quite shocked that we was classed as high-achievers but then, on reflection, we thought well we are. So it's about accepting it. […] Well now I'm proud of it. Now I've reflected on it, I'm quite proud of it. (Student 1)

Others were swifter to accept being identified as high-achieving and were "pleased and proud of being recognised" (Student 7). For some this was reflected in their first action being to call family members to share the news.

Some participants indicated there may be unanticipated consequences of their participation in the HARS. These included: challenging emotional responses (feeling overwhelmed, confused, and daunted); negative perceptions from peers and placement colleagues of HARS students; the pressure of meeting higher expectations; and, in one case, the impact of prioritising attending HARS activities over

placement. However, participants valued the status and recognition offered through the HARS; both as a celebration and acknowledgement of their achievements and in terms of employability: "Even if it's not something your employer knows about, if it's something you can talk about in interview and say what you've gained from it then that's what's gonna be recognised, isn't it?" (Student 6).

Ideas for the improvement of the HARS

During interviews participants reflected on ideas to address some of the challenges they had encountered and provided innovative and constructive suggestions to improve the scheme. These related to improving communication within and about the HARS, addressing timing challenges, new topics, and encouraging a greater sense of community amongst high-achieving students within the HARS.

> I think it would be really good if HARS could have a sort of way to bring students together, you know, to be able to support each other and make those networks and friendships and help each other with confidence really, because high-achiever or not, you know, you're always going to have times where, you know, you may be losing faith in your abilities. (Student 2)

DISCUSSION

The following section explores themes from the findings alongside reflections from those managing the scheme. Whilst the findings from our study should not be taken as representing the views of all high-achieving students, they provide illustrative examples of specific experiences of high-achievers which may be useful to reflect on when developing schemes to support these students.

Fostering students' academic and professional development

In our discussions around what worked for our participants in supporting their development, three themes emerged: identity, community, and agency.

Identity

For some participants, participation in the HARS raised aspirations for their studies and future career, it built their confidence and self-belief. Markus and Nurius (1986) posit that individuals hold a range of possible selves (visions of the self in the future) which encompass both ideal selves to be aspired to and feared selves to be avoided. Although more established in relation to school education, this theory has recently been applied to research and theory in HE (Henderson, Stevenson, and Bathmaker 2018). Markus and Nurius suggest that possible selves "can be viewed as cognitive bridges between the present and future, specifying how individuals may change from how they are now to what they will become" (1986, 961). They are dynamic, in flux, and influenced by the individual's imagination, past experiences, and socio-cultural context. As such, they reflect "the potential for growth and change" (1986, 957) and play a role in motivation, with more elaborated (fully developed) possible selves having a greater impact on behaviour in the present. Stevenson and Clegg (2011) suggest that having elaborated possible selves may be linked with student success.

The focus on activities that develop students' self-knowledge and a coaching-led approach to support students' career action-planning through the HARS may be positioned as supporting students to explore and elaborate their possible selves. As participants were on courses linked to health, social

care, and education professions, achievement in their university experience was strongly linked to achievement in practice/placement and becoming a professional in their field. Although it is hard to unpick which experiences contributed to their development, some participants valued elements of the HARS which they felt related to their professional identity and future career-selves. Some felt the tailored support through the scheme allowed them to develop toward their individual career and professional aspirations and they valued inspirational speakers from the professions.

There is also a sense that participation in the HARS helped some students develop their repertoire of possible selves, e.g., through drawing on their past experiences and knowledge in HARS activities and their individual aims and aspirations being listened to by a career coach. One participant described how a HARS event had broadened their perceptions of possible future selves that weren't constrained by their course of study. Stevenson and Clegg (2011) suggest that students may hold present possible selves as students/scholars as well as future selves as professionals. Some of our participants described emotional responses to being recognised through the scheme, the way they perceived themselves as students changed, indicating they expanded their repertoire of possible present selves. For example, participants who had not considered themselves to be high-achievers, began to see themselves that way and consequently had higher expectations of themselves. However, it may be useful to consider providing additional scaffolding for those who do not immediately see themselves as "high-achievers" or may be anxious and overwhelmed about being identified in this way. Where significant others reinforce the value and belief in students' possible selves they may be more likely to be elaborated and acted on (Harrison 2018). This speaks to the role of staff in encouraging students to develop positive possible selves.

Our findings, although small-scale, indicate that high-achievers are not a uniform group with high motivation and confidence in their abilities. In fact, some lacked confidence and did not perceive themselves as academically successful until being identified as such by others, and there were a range of emotional responses to being invited onto the scheme. This emphasises the importance of proactively inviting students onto the scheme: for some students this recognition alone was validating. Furthermore, monitoring the inclusivity of the scheme has shown that, thus far at least, the varied routes into the scheme have resulted in the demographic characteristics and socio-economic background of HARS students reflecting those of the wider student cohort. This suggests that high-achieving students may be as diverse and have as complex identities and needs as other students in the faculty. It is possible that strength-based schemes for high-achievers may offer an inclusive approach to support diverse students to achieve their full potential. However, more targeted research is needed to explore this potential. Cotton, Nash, and Kneale (2017) found in their research that some non-traditional students might not actively seek support during their studies (for a range of factors). Targeted and proactive support in schemes for high-achievers may help to connect all high-achieving students with useful support and services they may not otherwise access.

Agency
The vision for the scheme is to nurture and enable students to be their best selves. This requires them to develop self-knowledge and agency; they must know what path they wish to take, identify the support they need to get there, and take responsibility for their journey. In reflecting on how students may be empowered to act on desired possible-selves, Baxter Magolda's concept of self-authorship may be helpful: "The internal capacity to define one's belief system, identity, and relationships" (2007, 69)

"rather than depending on external values, beliefs and interpersonal loyalties" (2004a, xviii). Baxter Magolda (2004b) suggests this is the central goal of holistic approaches to HE in the twenty-first century and key to preparing students to be lifelong learners and effective citizens (Baxter Magolda 2004a).

Some participants reflected on the characteristics of high-achieving students as being proactive and taking responsibility for their own development. However, others acknowledged their responsibility but simultaneously expected or requested more prompts and guidance from staff (for example, e-mail reminders to attend sessions, staff mentors to guide them through the scheme or visit them on placement). As people move toward self-authorship, they rely less on external authority to guide the decisions they make, and individual agency and responsibility are crucial. Some of our participants reported making self-authored decisions. For example, one described prioritising attending a HARS session over their placement, making an informed decision about what they valued for their professional development.

However balancing support and autonomy is important to enable that journey (Baxter Magolda 2004b). Clearly, there is a need to scaffold student autonomy longitudinally through their participation in schemes for high-achievers, to strike a balance between students taking responsibility for their participation and creating a supportive environment to enable that engagement. We have found self-authorship and possible selves useful ideas for thinking about the connection between agency and identity: "Through the selection and construction of possible selves individuals can be viewed as active producers of their own development" (Markus and Nurius 1986, 955).

Comparing the comments some participants made about the impacts of engaging with the HARS, and their high-achievement/point experiences more widely, and drawing on Thomas et al. (2017), there may be an untapped benefit around students actively contributing to how the HARS is run. This could include considering students as change agents within schemes for high-achievers, through being partners in design, delivery and evaluation processes. The HARS student steering group have co-created some of the seminar series, and there are now five funded student scholars who engage with the HARS academic lead to help develop the scheme.

Community

Many of the enabling factors described by participants were about people: the supportive, flexible and encouraging approaches taken by the HARS staff; students' own attitude and behaviours; and the support of peers within university and in professional settings. It is interesting that the enabling role of peers was mentioned more in relation to wider high-point experiences and high-achievement generally than in relation to the HARS. This suggests that developing community and supportive relations between peers is an area of untapped enablers and benefit.

Building a sense of belonging has been shown to be important for student success, retention, and engagement by studies in the UK (Thomas 2012) and US (Tinto 2003). The *What Works?* model provides a useful lens for reflecting on student success and its authors suggest that attending to the human side of HE experiences is crucial.

> Interventions or activities should aim to enhance student engagement and belonging through supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, developing students' capacity as successful higher education (HE) learners, and providing an HE experience that is relevant to students' interests and future goals (Thomas et al. 2017, 4).

Our findings suggest that participants recognised that they had developed supportive connections with staff, had found the elements within the scheme relevant to their academic and professional aspirations, and had contributed to their personal and professional development, thus building capacity. However, a sense of community amongst peers was less recognised, and some participants made suggestions to improve and build community amongst high-achieving students. Fostering supportive social and intellectual learning communities among high-achieving students is also one of the aims of honors programmes internationally (Brinkel et al. 2015). A focus on community and networking may also help to build and sustain student engagement with the scheme. A number of participants described going to HARS events with friends who had also been recognised and opportunities to connect with fellow students before events may encourage those who would be less confident to attend on their own. A new HARS student society aims to provide a safe-space and community of practice for HARS students to share their experiences and build social relationships. Drawing on existing faculty activities, a drop-in open forum with refreshments is also being trialled, to provide informal space to chat about anything related to HARS.

As our participants identified, and both Thomas et al. (2017) and Baxter Magolda (2004b) acknowledge, these supportive relationships are not just between students, but between students and staff. If these are to extend beyond those staff directly involved in managing the scheme, then a focus on wider staff engagement is also crucial. In the HARS context, this involves engaging academic and student support staff, and professional colleagues mentoring students on placement.

Operational aspects of the scheme

The main challenges participants described as hindering their engagement with the HARS, and many of their suggestions for improvement, were operational: relating to time, communication, and changes to the structure of the scheme. Clearly, with a diverse student body and a mix of disciplines with different placement requirements across the faculty, it is difficult to schedule sessions which work for all students. However, suggestions around providing alternative timeslots for sessions and using a blended approach may go some way to addressing this challenge. The HARS now offers personalised tutorials and support over phone and Skype as well as on campus seminars over the summer break, and the delivery of seminars in the workplace is being piloted with students and their professional mentors. One of the challenges has been balancing the personalised ethos of the scheme with the practicalities of delivering this within the resources available. Communication remains a challenge (as the scheme is currently managed by one academic lead), however getting this right is essential to sustain student engagement and build trust. A graduate student success advisor has been employed part-time to develop the communication aspects of the scheme, including building the social media element.

The HARS uses a grade-based definition of high-achievement in its selection process. However, in its operation the four tracks of the scheme address the wider experiences of students (leadership, community engagement, and international mobility, alongside advanced academic skills). There is a potential dissonance here between the selection criteria and how the scheme frames high-achievement in its operation. Participants typically held holistic and multi-dimensional understandings of high-achievement; incorporating elements that go beyond their taught programme of study to include extra-curricular activities, life beyond university, and recognition of their own agency and role in that process. This could potentially lead to tensions where they felt these were not recognised by HARS or were in

competition for their time. Whilst these achievements may be recognised through other schemes within the university, students may not always be aware of these or may not compartmentalise aspects of their achievement in this way. There is potential to consider synergies between different institutional recognition and development schemes so that these can be formalised and presented in a holistic way to students—e.g., the HARS is now formally linked with the institution's extracurricular awards framework scheme which complements students' degrees.

CONCLUSION AND LEARNING

Our study explores how a scheme to support high-achieving students was experienced and perceived in practice. As we were interested in the particularity of how individuals might engage with such a scheme, we chose a small-scale, in-depth qualitative approach. We initially aimed for 8–12 participants, however only seven committed to participate in interviews. It is outside the scope of our study to investigate the reasons other students chose not to participate. However, we know from those interviewed that these students have full lives, with responsibilities outside of their studies and other extra-curricular commitments. We also restricted the number of e-mails and reminders we sent out inviting students to participate to ensure they did not feel pressured to participate. These invitations may have been missed by busy students. Reflecting on our approach, it may be useful to consider timing interviews after HARS activities, but this may not be viable for all cohorts. Our evaluation was in addition to regular feedback on the scheme through the steering group, informally within HARS sessions, and monitoring participation for inclusivity. We aimed to explore insights into how high-achieving students experienced the scheme and what worked for them as individuals; we did not explore the perspectives of those students who had been invited to participate in the scheme but chose not to. This would be a useful focus for future research and may provide further insight into reasons why students choose or choose not to engage with such initiatives. Our next aim is to explore, through a literature review, learning from others who are working to support high-achievers internationally.

The questions and issues raised in our study may be useful for others who are developing their own approaches for supporting high-achieving students. In particular, it may be fruitful to reflect on how students are supported and encouraged to elaborate on future and present possible selves as high-achievers, both professionally and academically, how student motivation and agency for desired possible selves may be built through supporting the development of self-authorship, and how individual and social aspects of identity and agency may be sustained through building strong supportive communities among high-achieving students.

Our analysis suggests that students valued both the celebratory and developmental aspects of the HARS. The aims of the scheme, to support academic achievement, raise aspirations and contribute to personal and professional development were largely reflected in participants' views of the benefits of engaging with the HARS. Reflecting on our findings, we found that community, agency, and identity were useful lenses through which to explore the future development of HARS. Interestingly the challenges experienced by participants were in the main operational, whereas the enabling factors tended to be social (the care and commitment of staff) and personal (individual behaviour and attitudes), suggesting that solutions to issues may be found through collaborative dialogue. Participants gave constructive suggestions around improving the scheme, and there is scope to further involve students to collaboratively unpick and address the challenges highlighted and foster community.

It is not surprising that the enabling factors, and the elements of the scheme valued by participants, are similar to those already identified as supporting success for all students (e.g. Chickering and Gamson 1987). Our findings suggest that these factors are as important for high-achieving students as their wider peer group. Since there are many schemes to support high-achievers from diverse backgrounds to access higher education, a point for reflection may be how are we ensuring these students have appropriate development and support to progress and succeed post enrolment? Outside of the UK arena, and particularly in the United States, there are many schemes available which support the development of high achieving students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, perhaps we should also be considering the support available for the same set of students post-qualification from HE, as part of a personal commitment to lifelong learning and the benefit this can bring in continuing to enable people to reach their potential and go far beyond their own limits. Offering tailored support for high-achieving students can be framed as one aspect of an overarching approach to support all students to reach their potential.

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ETHICS

The research received approval from the faculty ethics committee.

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NOTES

[1] http://www.winchester.ac.uk/Studyhere/Students-and-Money/Pages/University-of-Winchester-Scholars-Scheme.aspx
[2] http://www.surrey.ac.uk/student-personal-learning-study-hub-splash/student-personal-and-professional-development/stars-for-students
[3] https://www.ucc.ie/en/quercus/about/

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