

Blurring the lines: The university in high school

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BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

Abstract

A university preparatory school in Warsaw is actively blurring the lines between high school and university. Akademeia High School strives to create a university environment at the high school level for its students. Through semi-structured interviews of students and teachers, we sought to understand what exactly contributes to the university environment for students at Akademeia, the extent to which students notice and appreciate this environment, and the value that the university environment seems to afford students and teachers. We found that students and faculty frequently mentioned independence and agency, supported by an environment of trust and mutual respect, corroborated by one-on-one interviews, a survey of the oldest year of students, classroom observations, and casual conversations with students and educators. We describe the school through the gathered data and offer a few recommendations for this particular school and for schools in general.

Keywords: High school, international school, preparatory school, university environment, agency

Blurring the Lines: The University in High School

“Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be – the unknown person inside each of them is our hope for the future” (Janusz Korczak, 2018).

Paul was introduced to Janusz Korczak during a Saturday tour of Warsaw, graciously provided by his hosts at Akademeia High School. It feels appropriate to begin with a Korczak quote, in which he reminds us that children are their own agents, since it was so apparent during Paul’s visit that Akademeia has created a school culture in which agency can truly thrive.

Paul and co-author Jan Ladzinski met at a conference. As Paul’s school, Leysin American School in Switzerland (LAS), runs a program for visiting scholars, their first conversation ended with an invitation for Jan to visit LAS and a promise that they would stay in touch. After a few more meetings online it was decided that Paul would first visit Jan’s school, Akademeia, in Warsaw, and that Jan and a colleague, Bella, our third co-author, would visit LAS later in the same semester. This paper is the outcome of Paul’s visit to Akademeia.

In preparation for the visit, Paul reviewed Akademeia’s website for appropriate research topics. He sent a few possibilities to Jan. Together they decided to focus on an aspect of Akademeia that has a direct parallel at LAS: a desire to infuse the school culture with a "university-like" experience. For Akademeia, the school culture that is university-like is a set of values and actions that contribute to university preparation. For LAS, the university-like school culture focuses on teacher professional development for faculty members (e.g. action research, presentations, and publications). We decided that Paul would be the outside researcher at Akademeia in the beginning of the fall term; Jan and Bella would be the outside researchers at LAS at the end of the fall term. This study is about the first half of the project: the “university-like” environment promoted by Akademeia. The second study is reported separately.

Literature review

“We believe that a good university experience starts in school, which is why Akademeia looks, feels and operates like a university” (Akademeia High School, n.d.).

Akademeia is a preparatory school, in the American sense of the word. Namely, the mission of Akademeia is to prepare students for further study at university. More specifically, the mission of Akademeia is to prepare students for further study at some of the very best universities in the world.

As we are interested in the ways in which - and degrees to which - Akademeia “looks, feels, and operates like a university,” we assembled a sampling of what a few Anglophone universities communicate about university life to incoming students. What differences between high school and university should students be ready for as they transition to university? In the Results section below, we’ll see the extent to which these differences are reflected in the words of the students, teachers, and general operation of the school. In the Discussion section we’ll consider the potential value that Akademeia’s philosophy affords its students.

The transition from high school to university could be made easier in several ways. Academically, the rigor of the high school program arguably increases each year, though a gap may often persist between what high school students are capable of and what universities need (Briggs and Clark, 2012). Some curricula are specifically designed to function as university preparation, notably the British A-levels, the International Baccalaureate, and the American Advanced Placement program. “These certifications are a step higher than just receiving your high school diploma. Pupils are introduced to college-level coursework. This advanced certification, when earned, means that the pupil is capable of keeping up with the academic rigor of the world’s top universities” (Harrow International School, n.d.). There are also laws and programs that allow high school students to experience university teaching directly by enrolling

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

in university courses whilst still enrolled in high school (e.g. the Post Secondary Enrollment Option in Minnesota; Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.).

Academic preparation alone, however, probably only explains part of future student success. In all likelihood, the ability of students to think and work like successful university students is important, too. Here we might expect students to draw on soft skills - increasingly referred to as **core skills** (British Council, n.d.) or **essential skills** (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.) - like the ability to work independently, to collaborate, to productively take part in a discussion, and to be self-directed in general.

Finally, adjusting to the new social situation at the university may be important, too. For many students it is the first opportunity to live away from home. Students must be able to take care of small, everyday things themselves, as well as manage their own schedule, relationships with friends, personal finances, and a number of things which are either different from their high school experience or are altogether new.

What universities counsel

It is no surprise that there is significant overlap among universities when they advise incoming students of the difference between secondary education and the university, regardless of the country in which the university is located. This is by no means an attempt to present a complete list of differences between high school and university, but rather a sample of what four universities in different Anglophone cultures highlight in order to note that there are indeed common differences between the high school and the university, and that the differences cited are signals to look for in the interviews, surveys, and observations of the Results section below.

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

The College of Southern Nevada (n.d.) emphasizes the amount of **agency** students must exhibit.

The first three of their five bullets read:

- Students are expected to take responsibility for what they do and don't do, as well as for the consequences of their decisions.
- It's up to the students to read and understand the assigned material; lectures and assignments proceed from the assumption that the students have already done so.
- In college students are responsible for thinking through and applying what they have learned (2023).

The University of Manitoba (n.d.), Canada also stresses **personal responsibility**, noting that students need to “know rules and regulations yourself” and stress that “the approach to teaching and learning” is different from high school and that students will be “studying outside of class” (number 3 in the list from the University of Portsmouth below) and finding new friends (related to number 6 from the University of Portsmouth below).

Further, the College of Southern Nevada addresses the **rigor** of the curricular expectations, noting both mastery and attainment, stressing, like the University of Manitoba, that the expectations about teaching and learning are different:

- Mastery is often seen as the ability to apply what the student has learned to new situations or to solve new kinds of problems.
- "Results count." Though "good-faith effort" is important in regard to the professor's willingness to help students achieve good results, it will not substitute for results in the grading process (2023).

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

The University of Portsmouth (n.d.), UK, emphasizes the increased degree of independence students will have - and have to manage - at the university. Independence is also underscored by the University of Adelaide, Australia, explained as “learning independently vs managed learning” (University of Adelaide College, n.d.), and specifically mentioning one and four below, namely greater choice and managing one’s own life.

“Compared to school, you’ll have a lot more independence at university,” writes the University of Portsmouth (2023). Their list of differences include, for example:

1. more choice about what you learn
2. fewer scheduled lessons during the week with a mixture of lectures and seminars
3. homework that you are expected to organize and complete yourself
4. living away from home and managing your own personal life
5. no uniforms
6. the need to manage the balance between social and academic life

The University of Portsmouth emphasizes that while students are expected to be much more independent at the university, there is still academic and social support.

Taken as a whole, we see in these four examples themes of greater independence, agency, responsibility, and rigor at university level. Furthermore, US-based research by Conley identified four main dimensions of “college readiness” among high school students, namely: key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors (self-management), and contextual skills and awareness (college knowledge; Conley, 2010). These four dimensions generally align with the expectations set out in the examples from university guidelines for new students quoted above. Good preparation for higher education depends on high school syllabi aligned with university courses, seminars and assignments which involve complex problems and challenges whilst considering conflicting explanations of the same phenomena, and finally expectations of self-management. Conley stressed the importance of consistently challenging

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

high school students preparing for university with intellectually stimulating tasks centered around big ideas within a given field of study and with varying degree of support (scaffolding), noting that: “students can demonstrate their capabilities only if they are fully challenged and stretched beyond their comfort zones on a regular basis” (Conley, 2010, p. 69).

The importance of student agency and independence is reflected in the emphasis on self-management for “college readiness” discussed by Conley and also emphasized by a wide body of research outside the US context. Teaching practices that support student autonomy in secondary education, such as encouragement to pursue self-selected goals, avoidance of explicit rewards or punishments, and providing students with choice help develop student autonomy, which in turn positively relates to their academic achievement in higher education (van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen, and Meijer, 2021). Student perception of teachers who support their autonomy seems to encourage student perseverance and self-regulation, which in turn has a positive impact on academic achievement, at least among students in higher education (Hernández, Moreno-Murcia, Cid, Monteiro, and Rodrigues (2020).

There is perhaps, then, reason to believe that there is value in integrating at least some aspects of a “university-like” approach to education in high school. Such an approach may foster a smoother transition between secondary and higher education and positively impact future academic performance.

Potential criticism of emulating the university in high school

We shouldn’t assume that emulating the university in high school is always necessarily good practice, as there could of course be negative consequences. Unchecked expectations of independence, self-regulation, and rigor at too young of an age might cause stress and affect

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

motivation and mental health. For example, Will Richardson (2023) references David Gleason (2023) in which Gleason asked educators about the high rate of depressed and potentially suicidal students in the US. Their responses included, among others, concerns about:

- overscheduling students and adding more to their responsibilities without taking anything away;
- focusing on university admissions and allowing “the competitive college landscape to drive our program;” and
- rewarding high achievement instead of recognizing students’ effort.

A high school that prides itself on being "university-like" may recognize all three of these concerns in its programming. The drive to gain admittance into top tier universities is likely to concentrate the focus of students, teachers, and parents on high academic achievement, which in turn is likely to lead to pressure to fill both the curriculum and extracurricular programs and expect consistent high performance.

There is therefore perhaps a nuanced interpretation needed for what a “university-like” high school is. The balance between high school and university-level academic work, the balance between appropriate support and appropriate opportunities for independence, and the general well-being of students is all important for consideration. A high-functioning high school with attributes of the university must perhaps be judged based on its ability to prepare healthy and happy university students of the future, rather than narrowly-focused, overworked, and stressed young adults.

Method

We asked two research questions.

Research questions

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

1. To what extent do students, teachers, and an outsider (Paul) sense that Akademeia is functioning as a university? How so?
2. What value does functioning as a university bring to the students of Akademeia?

Setting

Akademeia is an international high school in Warsaw, Poland, that was opened in 2016. It has students studying in the British system from Year 9 to Year 13 (or Grades 8-12 in the US educational system). Students complete the GCSE and A-level programs with a focus on matriculating in top tier universities.

The school is located in a neighborhood of residences and a number of other schools. The school itself has two main floors in a U shape, with a large outdoor space in the middle of the U, bordering on sport fields. Classrooms are generally built to hold up to twelve students comfortably. There are well-lit and comfortable spaces, including a spacious lobby with a café, a cafeteria, and library. There is also a large auditorium. There are multiple counselors for learning and emotional support, a teachers' work room with no particular assigned seating, a reception area for school administration, and wide hallways with lockers and benches outside the classrooms. Classrooms are equipped with large monitors, whiteboards, and boardroom style tables. The decor is industrial chic.

Participants

Participants in the study included:

- six **students** from Year 13, in the final year of their studies. All students were highly proficient non-native speakers of English, with Polish and other mother tongues;

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

- the entire **Year 13 cohort of students**, which was asked to complete a survey constructed from findings of the interview. The six students who were interviewed were asked *not* to complete the survey;
- two teachers who have been employed by the school for four or more years, both native speakers of English;
- one alumnus who was graduated from the school in 2019, a highly proficient speaker of English and a native Polish speaker; and
- more indirectly, the teachers and students in the ten classes that Paul observed, as well as Paul's impressions from casual conversations over coffee and lunch.

Procedure

Paul was able to spend parts of six days at the school, scheduling interviews and observations daily.

The interviews were semi-structured, following a script (see Appendices A1, A2, and A3) that was similar but adapted for students, alumni, and teachers. Interviews were one-on-one and conducted in person, except for the one interview held with an alumnus, which was conducted via Google Meet. All interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed by Google Meet. Transcriptions were cleaned up following the interviews to avoid introducing misinterpretations due to faulty voice to text transcription.

Interview themes were noted directly in the transcripts. For example, a significant conversation (in the judgment of the primary researcher) about the importance of independence was noted in a different color font to the transcript itself. After all the interview

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

transcripts were analyzed, common themes were identified for discussion in the Results section below.

The students, the alumnus, and the teachers who were interviewed were a convenience sample. The students were chosen mostly because they were in Jan's advisory group or class. Paul met the alumnus coincidentally. One of the teachers was asked to interview with Paul, the other teacher introduced himself over coffee and suggested that he'd like to be interviewed (perhaps responding to an email Paul composed and Jan sent to all faculty members, introducing the study and inviting teachers to interview). There was no attempt at random selection.

The interview data was supplemented by observation data. Paul visited ten different classes for 40 minutes each (either the first or second half of a class on either side of its regularly scheduled break). Paul wrote general notes to each teacher in the form of a blog, written during the observation, which also served as a memory aid.¹ These general impressions, coupled with further impressions from speaking informally to students and faculty members in the lobby, cafeteria, library, and in one student advisory meeting, lent additional context to the interview data and afforded Paul a general impression of school culture and atmosphere.

After analyzing and discussing the themes from the interview data, we constructed a survey, based on those themes, to present back to the entire Year 13 cohort of the school (see Appendix B). A first draft of the survey was given to the six current Year 13 students who had participated in the interviews. Their feedback was used to create a second and final draft of the

¹ The blogs were subsequently published by The International Educator at <https://blog.tieonline.com/category/paul-magnuson/>.

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

survey. The goal of the survey was further triangulation of the data gleaned from the interviews with the six Year 13 students to determine if their comments were a fair representation of their cohort year overall. The survey operated on a four point scale, including four forced choice responses: “This isn’t my experience at all;” “This is just a minimal part of my experience;” “This is sort of my experience;” and “This is totally my experience.” In the results section, these are reported as numbers 1 to 4, where 1 is “This isn’t my experience at all,” and 4 is “This is totally my experience.”

Results

Reviewing the data from the interview transcripts resulted in several themes. These themes are not discrete; indeed, the themes share attributes with each other. For example, the quality of teachers and the good relationship with teachers that students perceive led us to the theme of teacher quality. Other themes like independence, choice, agency and rigor are perhaps all aspects of how a teacher might operate in order to be perceived as a quality teacher who has good relationships with students.

We have made no attempt to quantify the comparable strength of one category compared to another. We haven’t done so because we believe any attempt to do so is not supported by the manner in which we collected the data. While a particular word might appear more often than another in the transcripts (e.g. ‘independence’ occurs often, ‘agency’ less often), we find no particular grounds to then assume the students value independence more than agency. In this case, the latter word might simply be less familiar to students than the former. Further, what the students express as independence might be in their minds - or some of their minds, some of the time - closer to what we the authors understand as agency. Therefore there is no attempt to quantify their responses. We simply report on themes in the

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

data that occurred across the interviews and which, in our estimation seem to contribute to the university-like feel of the school.

We included corroboration from the survey (both the multiple-choice questions and the one open-ended question) under each of the themes. The survey was constructed based on the data from the interviews and given to the entire cohort of Year 13 students ($n = 78$; see Appendix B). The total number of responses is 45. All respondents self-reported that they were in Year 13 and had not been interviewed. Since the six students we interviewed are not included in the survey, the percentage of responses is $45/78 - 6$ (or $45/72$) for a return rate of 62%. There were 9 multiple choice questions, each reported below, and one open-ended question: "In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?" The responses to the open-ended questions have been sorted under the report of the multiple choice responses with an indication of how often certain themes arose.

What the interview data revealed seemed to be largely corroborated by the surveys.

Teacher quality

Interviews

Students often mentioned teacher quality and their relationships with their teachers. By teacher quality they mean the training their teachers have, how expert in the subject matter the teacher seems to them, and the manner in which the teacher runs the courses and provides associated help outside of class. One student said coming to the school from a public school was a bit of a shock because she "had never met a doctor before." It is true that there are several members of the teaching faculty with doctorates; in fact, the school has prioritized subject level expertise over formal teacher training when hiring. Students perceive that their teachers know their subjects well, too, but their impression of their teachers may be mostly characterized by the respect they have for them due to the respect the teachers themselves show the students. (Respect is another of our overlapping categories.) One student, making a

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

comparison with her previous experience in public school, noted that this school's teachers earned their students' respect through their knowledge and ability to teach. They didn't demand respect, they "earned it." Her previous experience seems to have been a school culture in which students had to show respect for teachers because that was what was expected, but it was not necessarily earned.

Often the students mentioned the teacher-student relationship, how they know there is a hierarchy but "it doesn't feel like that," and how their teachers give them a great deal of independence, yet are there for them when they need help. They also referenced the passion the teachers demonstrated and the sense that teachers wanted what was best for students. Thus Independence is also a theme, tied closely perhaps to the theme of Agency. All told, the students painted a picture of qualified, passionate teachers teaching them in a manner that includes a great deal of independence and respect for them as individuals, creating an only slightly hierarchical relationship which allows them agency, and perhaps most importantly, a desire to be at the school. One student claimed that she enjoys coming to school every single day, specifically mentioning the coffee she buys from the café in the school lobby ("Even though it's so expensive!") before the start of the first class.

Class observations of the ten classes Paul attended support the students' opinions. Teachers in the school are prepared, even-handed, knowledgeable, and they generally started class immediately on the hour. The observed teaching style was mostly a lecture format, taking responses from students and occasionally guiding a student discussion or letting a student discussion run its course.

Survey

Forced choice.

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

The parallel survey prompt to this category was: “At Akademeia, the teachers are passionate and qualified.” Four of five responding students ranked this prompt with a 4: “This is totally my experience.”

Table 1*Passionate and qualified teachers*

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	36	9	0	0

Related open-ended responses.

The following are related student comments generated by the prompt: “In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?”

Students cited the quality of the teaching faculty in a variety of ways, including “very academic and specialized teachers,” “highly qualified teachers,” and the “expertise and specialization that the teachers have.” In addition to their qualifications, it is apparent that students value the relationship they have with the teachers, seen in comments like “teachers generally treat students like adults,” “the responsibility that teachers expect us to have,” and “the way that teachers co-operate with students and it feels like there is mutual respect between us.” There seems to be a very strong culture, at least from the perception of the students, that their teachers are both qualified and approachable, that the expertise of the teaching faculty is not just in their subject matter, but also lies in their ability to engender respect and trust.

Respect and Trust***Interviews***

[A] “... primary and irrefutable right of children is the right to voice their thoughts, to active participation in our considerations and verdicts concerning them. When we have gained their respect and trust, once they confide in us of their own free

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

will and tell us what they have the right to do – there will be fewer puzzling moments, fewer mistakes.” (Janusz Korczak, 2018)

Students uniformly mentioned a teacher-student relationship that made them comfortable and seemed to afford some of the other themes we found, like agency and independence. Students reported that they felt they were “not treated like a child,” but rather that they are “treated like an adult” and that “teachers take me seriously” and “value student opinions.”

The teacher student relationship is akin to a partnership, in the words of one student. This feeling is perhaps created - or at least not damaged - by the school’s behavior management and discipline practices, which were uniformly described as being very “light.” The system is not punitive, in the words of one teacher, and indeed several students mentioned that there is no punishment for arriving late to class or for failing to complete homework. As one student explained, it’s just the late student or the student not completing homework who is hurt, and the students understand that. They are trusted to be in class, to be actively engaged during class, and to complete the work that is going to help them succeed. I observed, in the morning classes I attended, some students arriving late. They entered the class without a large fuss and got out their devices or notebooks. One student, arriving nearly a half hour late, apologized quietly to the teacher, the teacher said “it’s okay” just as quietly, and the class discussion never missed a beat.

In a similar fashion to comments in the section above on Teacher Quality, students mentioned that they weren’t led, but rather trusted; they weren’t forced to learn, but rather they wanted to do the work necessary to learn because they felt teachers were taking them seriously and that “teachers allow students their thoughts.”

Perhaps the easiest instances of respect and trust to observe were the times students politely left and re-entered the classroom. There was no fuss or question, the teachers trust the

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

students to manage themselves. More subtly, there was little talk about getting out materials or the necessity of taking notes. These were skills the students, especially those in Year 13, are managing themselves. Students choose whether to use paper and pen or a device. Arriving on time for the interviews for this study was left up to the students - every student arrived on time and was aware of the purpose of the interview. Telephone use was not observed as a problem even once. Students are told to only use their phones when it is appropriate for the content of the lesson. There didn't seem to be any tension about phone use.

Respect and trust run much deeper, of course, from what an observer can immediately see. Indications are, however, from the ease with which teachers and students speak to each other in class and in the halls, lobby, and cafeteria, that the relationship is not one of "fear," as one student pointed out, but rather one of respect and trust.

Survey**Forced choice.**

The parallel survey prompt to this category was: "At Akademeia, I find that the teachers trust me."

Table 2*Respect and Trust*

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	30	14	1	0

Two-thirds of students responded with a 4, the other third with a 3 or, in the case of one student, a 2.

Related open-ended responses.

The following are related student comments generated by the prompt: "In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?"

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

A few students summarized what seems to be the general consensus found in the open-ended comments: “Especially in older years it doesn't feel like we are being looked down at which I really appreciate,” and the “professional partnership between students and teachers.” One student expresses a similar sentiment, but differently: “No one scolds you for not completing your work.” Students seem to feel like they are indeed in a partnership with teachers, that they are not in an adversarial relationship, and that they are trusted to manage their own time and work.

Independence

Interviews

The theme of being independent and having independence was mentioned consistently by everyone interviewed. Some students (and a teacher) mentioned office hours as a particular example (an optional time when students can see a teacher for extra help). Students mentioned studying, taking on leadership roles in clubs (see also Agency) and completing the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) essay.

The EPQ “is an A-level standard standalone qualification designed to extend and develop your students' abilities beyond the A-level syllabus and prepare for university or their future career” (AQA Questions Matter, 2023). Student presentations of their EPQs occurred immediately before Paul's arrival for his weeklong stay, thus were very much on the minds of students. Their independent work on papers of up to 5,000 words was optional. More than one student mentioned their work on this particular project.

Otherwise, students, the former student, and both teachers mentioned independence as a general operating bias of the school. One teacher said independence was “built into the culture of the school” and the students expressed their notion of independence in terms of not being “led by the hand” by teachers, but rather finding “your own path” and becoming independent thinkers. The discipline policy and procedures at the school were consistently

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

referred to as light. Students were expected to monitor themselves in terms of class attendance, note taking, and homework.

Survey

Forced choice.

The parallel survey prompt to this category was: “*At Akademeia, I experience a lot of independence.*”

Table 3

Independence

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	22	22	1	0

Student responses were evenly split 4 and 3, with 1 student reporting a 2.

Related open-ended responses.

The following are related student comments generated by the prompt: “In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?”

While the forced choice ratings are not as high as Teacher Quality and Trust and Respect, the number of mentions of the independence that the school affords its students far exceed any other open-ended comment. The notion of independence is, in short, very important for the students. It may be the key to the "university-like" culture of the school. It certainly is intertwined with notions of teacher quality and approachability, respect, and trust.

Besides various formulations about how important a sense of independence is in the creation of "university-like" culture, some students mentioned specific parts of the program that they felt supported their independence: “Study periods for independent studying and not many classes, as we only take three A-levels;” specific projects “which require you to work on your own;” and “Open discussions” in the classroom. The responsibility “to show up and [the] ability

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

to leave school whenever” was mentioned a few times, connected to a sense of teacher trust, in that it is up to the student to regulate their own behavior. Perhaps the strongest summary of independence - and preparation for university and life-long learning in general - was expressed this way: “Huge independence and responsibility for myself which in turn makes me (sic) an amazing opportunity to grow not only as a student but also as a person and manage work on my own.”

Agency

Interviews

The two teachers who were interviewed mentioned agency about as often as the students who were interviewed. Teachers mentioned student ownership, developing a capacity to “deal with things,” and that the opposite of creating a culture of agency leads to students feeling “a lack of control” that can “lead to rebellion.” The students mentioned agency, twice using the actual term. The first time this happened, Paul asked the student if she had been taught that word at school or if it was part of her active vocabulary. She didn’t seem to understand the intent of the question - apparently she was familiar with what agency meant and didn’t use it because she felt prompted from discussion at school.

Students also expressed the notion of agency by using terms like “self-responsibility,” “personal responsibility,” and reporting that “responsibility is given to the student” and that they were able to “follow our own project” and manage themselves in clubs and activities.

In the classroom setting, student-led discussions were mentioned, as well as an activity we have previously mentioned under Independence: learning to take notes, to take responsibility for studying, and to manage one’s own schedule. One student said, “It feels like we teach ourselves as well,” a clear statement of agency that expresses an absence of a divide between the responsibilities of the teacher and the student. Students adopt at least facets of the teaching role to become autodidactic learners.

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

School programming, outside of the academic classes, was mentioned as supporting student agency as well. Students mentioned office hours, clubs and activities, the ability to create a unique project outside of class (in addition to the EPQ), and for one student in particular, the experience of learning to live away from home as one of the school's students living in the boarding house.

Survey**Forced choice.**

The parallel survey prompt to this category was: "At Akademeia, teachers expect me to be responsible for my own learning. Getting to class on time, participating in class, and studying for class are all up to me."

Table 4*Agency*

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	29	16	0	0

Related open-ended responses.

The following are related student comments generated by the prompt: "In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?"

Agency is, of course, directly linked with independence. Students cannot practice agency if they do not have a respectable degree of independence. In that respect, many of the student comments under Independence could be repeated here. However, agency goes beyond independence, bringing a sense of action and intention to use the independence one has in productive ways. Perhaps the strongest summary of agency offered by a student was expressed this way: "Huge independence and responsibility for myself which in turn makes me (sic) an

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

amazing opportunity to grow not only as a student but also as a person and manage work on my own.”

Of relevance here is a short anecdote from Paul's interactions with students. During the weeklong stay, Paul had a chance to speak, in the library on a Friday afternoon after classes, to faculty members. One Year 12 student attended as well, though the event was actually not for students. As the only student in the room, and despite not being formally invited, they dared to join the conversation during the question and answer session. The general feeling from interacting with other students over the course of the week is that it would not be unusual at all to expect that level of maturity and self-direction from many of the students. Whether they arrived at the school with this level of agency, or whether the school has afforded them the chance to develop this agency, will be an interesting question for the future.

Choice

Interviews

Just as there is little agency without independence, there is also little agency without choice. Students mentioned choice most frequently in terms of the coursework they pursued, which was most relevant when they chose which A-levels to pursue. Students also mentioned choice in the loose manner in which homework is monitored, internships, clubs, activities, and in general, a feeling of freedom at the school. For one teacher, that sense of freedom was bolstered by the lack of a dress code for both students and teachers.

Survey

Forced choice.

The parallel survey prompt to this category was: “At Akademeia, I find that I have lots of choice.”

Table 5

Choice

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	30	12	1	0

Roughly two-thirds of the students responded with a 4. One student responded with a 2.

Related open-ended responses.

The following are related student comments generated by the prompt: “In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?”

“Freedom and opportunities” was perhaps the most general expression of choice written by a student. One student feels that her choice of studying art allows her “much more freedom to express our ideas and experiment ... I like the amount of Independence which I presume is ‘university-like.’” Other students express this idea more generally, writing that “Every student has their own passions and interests, and follows up on them” and “I guess we are given some space for pursuing what we want.”

Rigor

Interviews

Students frequently mentioned the rigor of the writing required at the school. In part this might be due to the recent presentations of the EPQ. Students also mentioned the nature and amount of academic readings. In general, current students felt that the “school demands a lot of you” and that there was significant depth and breadth, something corroborated by the one alumnus we interviewed, who was able to compare his university experience and the high school preparation of his colleagues at the university. The “work is intense” at the school, he reported, and the amount of reading and writing in high school paid off at his university.

Paul felt mentally stimulated in all classes, and particularly challenged in, for example, courses about philosophy (Berkeley and Locke), history, research methods, and history of art (architecture). In general, the teachers’ presentation of materials was fast-paced and detailed,

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

and the students were very familiar with note taking either on devices or paper. They responded to teacher questions and posed their own and many appeared to be comfortable in discussions beyond factual knowledge, including speculation and posing what-ifs in their conversations.

Survey**Forced choice.**

The most directly related survey prompt was: “I find that the coursework demands a lot of me.”

Table 6*Rigor*

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	18	20	6	1

This is the first theme in which slightly more students responded with a 3 (for which the response wording was “This is sort of my experience” than a 4 (“This is totally my experience”) and to which more than a single student responded with a 2 (“This is just a minimal part of my experience”).

Related open-ended responses.

The following are related student comments generated by the prompt: “In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?”

There are not many student comments about the rigor of the academic coursework. This may be in part to the qualifying statement many students wrote along the lines of “I am not fully sure as to how does university operate (sic).” In fact, several students declined to offer this single open-ended question at all because “having never been to university myself, I don’t think I can answer this question.” They are aware that they do not know how rigorous university might be because they have never been there. One student did offer a comment about how courses

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

are run, mentioning “the overall A-level style of studying with courseworks and essays instead of small and useless tests.”

Scaffolded experience

Interviews

Finally, in addition to the quality of the teachers, the environment of self-regulation and trust, and the perceived rigor, students often spoke to the central theme of the study. They agreed that the school is similar to a university (a comment which, as noted above, they often qualified by reminding the researchers that they had not yet been at university), but that at the same time it is not a university. It is (now in the words of us as authors) a scaffolded experience - a high school experience with certain university attributes and expectations. One teacher expressed this notion as a “compromise between high school and university” where teachers provide some guidance, or as the other teacher put it, the school curriculum and culture provides “guided self-management.”

Students expressed the university nature of their high school as a “path to maturity” and a place where they can get support to make good decisions. “It’s school, it shouldn’t be university, it prepares you for university,” said one student. Another mentioned that students get less help as they progress through the years, so Year 9 students get significantly more direction from teachers than Year 13 students, for example. All in all, the emphasis on functioning in a way similar to university delivers on its promise of being a good transition to university, at least among the students who were interviewed (and according to the extent that they can predict their future university experience). They get to “practice skills” for university and learn to write essays and take exams that are “university-like” so they aren’t “shocked,” as a teacher put it, when they do start at university. Interestingly, more than one student, and a teacher, mentioned the prevalence of teaching through lectures and note-taking as university preparation as well. There was some student variation in the perception of university (e.g. fewer tests or more tests,

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

smaller classes or large lecture halls), so their self-reports of university preparation before actually being at the university should be taken into consideration.

Survey**Forced choice.**

The most directly related survey prompt was: "I think there is appropriate support for high school students who are getting ready for the university."

Table 7*Scaffolded support*

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	34	8	3	0

Related open-ended responses.

The following are related student comments generated by the prompt: *In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?*

"Akademeia offers a ginormous (sic) amount of help in both academics and university applications, but it is only up to students whether to accept it or not." This student statement reflects the ethos of independence and trust established above. Teachers do, at least according to some students, make sure the amount of independence is balanced with support. "Teachers are engaged and helpful with not only schoolwork but also uni applications and care more about attendance than in a Polish school, for example." Another student, responding to what makes Akademeia feel and look like a university, expressed the balance this way: "The degree of independence, combined with the support available - especially because you often have to take initiative to receive this support." Teacher support is there, but there doesn't seem to be a lot of hand holding; students may still feel that they carry the responsibility to seek out the support they need.

Do students do well in this "university-like" culture?

Survey

A final forced-choice item (with the opportunity to respond with an “Other”) asked students to respond to this prompt: “My friends and colleagues at Akademeia - the other students in Year 13 - do well in the ‘university-like’ culture we have at school.” The question assumes that students find the culture at Akademeia “university-like,” something that one student brought to our attention by selecting “Other” and writing: “I don't believe there is a ‘university-like’ culture at Akademeia.” One additional student selected “Other” and explained that having not been at a university yet, they couldn't answer. The other students responded as in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Do students do well in this "university-like" culture?

	4	3	2	1
<i>n</i>	12	24	5	1

This ranking is below that of all other survey questions. It may reflect the bias that something can be perceived as good for me but not for them, seen, for example, in data elicited from parents in the United States about the quality of schools, which they find significantly worse in general than when asked about the school their own child attends (Brenan, 2023). Be that as it may, the results here, though still positive, do vary from the quite consistently high positive responses on every other question in the survey.

Discussion

“You [adults] grumble: - [...] ‘We have to lower ourselves to their [children’s] world. Lower, bend, shrink.’ You are mistaken. [...] – ‘We have to raise ourselves to their feelings. Rise, reach out, stand on our toes, reach for ...’” (Korczak, 2018)

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

It has been in vogue for the last several years among educators, e.g. Will Richardson (2015) and the recent ACE accreditation protocol (New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2022), to wonder aloud what a school's definition of learning is. Further, reform-minded writers, podcasters, and others often pose the question: What is school for? (See the viral Youtube video by the same name, Prince Ea, 2018).

It turns out that the answer to both questions can be fairly tricky. Definitions of learning vary as much as the purpose of school. However, a private school like the one in this study, which positions itself as a university preparatory school which "looks, feels and operates like a university" (Akademeia High School, n.d.), can fairly reliably pinpoint the answer to the latter question as helping students have the option to get into the most competitive universities in the UK, USA, and elsewhere, and the answer to the former question probably revolves around two principal goals: (1) familiarity and a high degree of facility with A-level subject matter and (2) the essential skills to succeed at the university. These skills are very much in line with what the students and teachers repeatedly mentioned in the interviews: self-regulation (i.e. independence and agency) and learning habits befitting a successful university student (i.e. dealing with choice, managing one's own time, knowing how to read and write academically, take notes, and study).

If those are indeed the goals of the school, it seems they are not only being met, but are met exceedingly well. The students, at least in Year 13, are mature, focused, and well on their way to the self-regulated behavior that in all likelihood is associated with future university success.

We built the data collection of this study to answer two research questions:

- To what extent do students, teachers, and an outsider sense that Akademeia is functioning as a university? How so?

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

- What value does functioning as a university bring to students?

The students and teachers we interviewed do feel like Akademeia is functioning like a university, particularly as students near the end of their high school career. They do not, however, think that the school is functioning just like a university, nor that it would be appropriate for it to do so. Rather, there is a sort of built-in scaffolded experience, where elements of the university are tangible, but the amount of support from teachers is perceived as greater than it will be when the students are at the university. Students expect to be independent, in other words, e.g. they know that the teachers are there for them, they have weekly meetings in small groups with an assigned teacher, and they have regular access to teachers.

The value of running a university preparatory school similar to a university is intuitive, especially given the good fit between the high school programming and the goals of the students, who are solidly focused on entering university following Year 13, and indeed, universities with names that most people would recognize. The approach is not sink or swim submersion, however, but rather one in which students are supported, not coddled, as they assume responsibility for their own learning, from keeping track of their own schedule to learning how best to support their learning through how they interact in class and complete school work.

Interestingly, some students and one of the teachers mentioned that the lecture-style format of teaching, or lecture-style with interspersed discussions, was also an important part of scaffolding in preparation for learning in a future university program. The presumption is that university instruction is through lecture, which perhaps it often is, especially in earlier years

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

with large class sizes in introductory courses, and that the best way to prepare for learning by lecture is in fact learning through lecture. There is truth there, in that we get better at that which we practice; but there is also tension, in that the school probably advertises lecture-based learning less than learning through discussion.

The classrooms themselves have been deliberately furnished to facilitate discussion, with Harkness tables that seat up to 12 students (Phillips Exeter Academy, 2023). However, observations in classes and of classes through the glass wall along the hallway were consistently of students generally grouped on the side of the table opposite the screen where the teacher projected materials for class or wrote on the whiteboard. Indeed, the students seem very adept at taking notes, answering questions, asking questions occasionally as well as occasionally discussing in the default teacher-fronted presentation style teaching. They are well prepared for lecture format at the university, and quite possibly well-prepared for smaller seminars with much more student discussion, though they practice this less.

It is worth noting that students, though nearly unanimously positive about their own experience (at least the students who completed the survey, it is possible that less satisfied students are underrepresented), are a bit more circumspect about the whether the "university-like" culture of the school is as beneficial for their peers as it is for them. Exploring this rather unexpected result further may be in the interest of the school.

Recommendations for Akademeia

This observation brings us to the first of two concrete recommendations for the school. The students we interviewed about the "university-like" environment of the school often

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

preceded their comments by reminding the researchers that they didn't really know what real university was like. To the extent that the school is preparing students for an unknown, it may be worthwhile to familiarize students more with university itself. University visits are presumably not difficult to organize, at least locally, and could run the gamut from tours and course visits to enrollment in online or physical courses (e.g. during the summer). As many students' families are well-to-do and presumably travel often, guidance could be given to students in the final years of the school regarding how best to set up a university visit abroad during, for example, a family vacation.

The second recommendation comes from a few other comments, either during interviews or elsewhere, regarding the growth of the school. In its infancy, the school was so small that everyone knew everyone, something that isn't possible anymore. Furthermore, in its infancy, there were of course fewer guidelines, handbooks, rules and regulations, and this sort of policy and bureaucracy. With the growth of the school it will be tempting to formalize practices and to have more and more things in writing, e.g. for the purpose of possible future accreditation. The caution is that as the organization matures it may lose some of the freedoms, independence, and personal connections upon which it currently relies to build the strong culture of trust and individual responsibility documented in this study. Losing features which currently contribute to the "university-like" culture of the school are of course not in line with the goals of the school, but may be an outcome of some of the processes of "doing" school, like accreditation, policy making, standardization and the like. Put simply, it may be good for the school to keep in mind the adage: "Don't fix it if it ain't broke."

Recommendations for other schools

“The relationship between adults, particularly caregivers, and children must never have the character of a struggle for authority and rights: caregivers have an obligation to skillfully arrange conditions under which children may freely develop in the fullness of their rights” (Janusz Korczak, 2018).

There are also two general considerations for other schools which would like to learn from the apparently highly successful culture of Akademeia.

First, trust breeds trust. Distrust breeds distrust. Akademeia currently runs with few behavior, rules, a self-described non-punitive behavior system, and a liberal acceptance of - and downright encouragement of - students managing their own behavior, for example in their ability to arrive late for the first class of the day or to leave the room when they need to take care of something, whatever it may be. Teachers trust the students and students report that their relationship with the teachers is very good, creating a positive feedback loop in the direction of well mannered, self-directed students who learn and teachers who can focus on instruction and learning instead of poor behavior.

That feedback loop can run in the opposite direction, though, and often does. A lack of trust can lead to more and more rules, as well as the type and degree of punishment for when rules are broken, which may lead to behavior problems that might not exist if there weren't quite so many rules for managing them. A positive feedback loop in a negative direction can easily be created, one in which there is ever-increasing pressure on students to act out and teachers to maintain control through punitive measures. Lack of trust breeds lack of trust.

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

That said, Akademeia is a relatively new school that developed its own particular ethos from the start. A school with an established behavior code cannot expect wholesale adoption of a new culture where an existing culture is already in place. A school could, however, take a step back based on Akademeia's example to ask itself if its current culture is the best culture it could have, and whether or not there are opportunities in the existing culture to introduce greater freedoms in the spirit of creating a scaffolded experience, either to university life, or simply to greater levels of student agency.

To the extent that high school is preparing students for lifelong learning, which is necessarily fueled by an individual's internal motivation, Akademeia's model may well be good to heed.

Finally, we should also ask ourselves if it is appropriate to create a "university-like" environment at the high school level. While there seem to be many reasons why to do this at Akademeia, especially given the selection of students and the high functioning nature of the school, it is entirely reasonable to imagine schools where the creation of a "university-like" atmosphere may be inappropriate. Preparation for a future step does not necessarily have to include some or many aspects of that future. In some contexts, it may be a mistake to presume that simply doing more of what is coming in the future, today, is the best preparation possible. Schools can learn from Akademeia's success through reflecting on how Akademeia has arrived at its current state and how its context is supported by its programming. The possible learning here is certainly not limited to the notion that one should simply adopt what another program is doing, but rather use that experience as a mirror for further reflection.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interviews

Interview questions

Paul will ask these questions of everyone. They are intended to guide the conversation. Paul may ask follow up questions that are not listed here, depending on the direction the conversation follows.

____ Student interview questions

- What do you think the school means when it says that it is trying to provide a university-type experience?
 - Why do you think Akademeia thinks a university type experience is a good idea?
 - Do you agree that there are experiences that you would call “university-like?” What specific examples can you share?
 - Do you talk about this university aspect of Akademeia with your friends or family? What do you talk about - or what might you talk about if you DID talk about it?
 - Was the university experience of Akademeia a factor in your decision to come to school here?
 - What else would you like to share?
-

____ Alum interview questions

- What do you think the school means when it says that it is trying to provide a university-type experience?
- Why do you think Akademeia thinks a university type experience is a good idea?

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

- Do you agree that there are experiences that you would call “university-like?” What specific examples can you share?
 - Did you talk about this university aspect of Akademeia with your friends or family? have you talked about it with others since leaving Akademeia? What did you talk about - or what might you talk about if you DID talk about it?
 - Was the university experience of Akademeia a factor in your decision to go to school there?
 - Do you feel the university experience of Akademeia was beneficial for you. Can you give some examples?
 - What else would you like to share?
-

Teacher interview questions

- What do you think the school means when it says that it is trying to provide a university-type experience?
- Why do you think Akademeia thinks a university type experience is a good idea?
- Do you agree that there are experiences that you would call “university-like?” What specific examples can you share?
- How have you directly contributed to creating a university experience at Akademeia?
- What else, besides this university tupe of experience, sets Akademeia apart from other schools you know and/or have worked in?
- What else would you like to share?

Appendix B

Survey Questions

To what extent is Akademeia High School similar to the university?

Paul Magnuson recently visited Akademeia and interviewed students in Year 13 about how Akademeia "looks, feels and operates like a university." This survey is being distributed to all Year 13 students to see the extent to which the data from the interviews of six students reflects everyone's views. A big thank you to the student in the research methods class who suggested adding this survey to the study design! And thank you all for taking a bit of time with this survey.

1. I am in Year 13 at Akademeia.

That's right! Please proceed.

Oops! I'm not in Year 13. I should close this survey and get a snack in the lobby.

2. I was NOT interviewed by Paul for this study when he visited Akademeia in September.

Right again! Please proceed.

I was indeed interviewed. This survey is for those who were NOT interviewed, so it looks like it's snack time for me in the lobby, too!

Students were instructed to mark one oval (of four choices) for the following statements based on the descriptors below:

This is totally my experience

This is sort of my experience.

This is just a minimal part of my experience.

This isn't my experience at all.

3. At Akademeia, I experience a lot of independence.

4. At Akademeia, I find that the teachers trust me.

5. At Akademeia, I find that I have lots of choice.

6. At Akademeia, I find that the coursework demands a lot from me.

7. At Akademeia, the teachers are passionate and qualified.

8. I agree with this statement from our school's webpage: "Akademeia looks, feels and operates like a university." Mark only one oval.

9. The amount of support at Akademeia is the right fit for high school students who are getting ready for university.

10. At Akademeia, teachers expect me to be responsible for my own learning. Getting to class on time, participating in class, and studying for class are all up to me.

BLURRING THE LINES: THE UNIVERSITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

11. My friends and colleagues at Akademeia - the other students in Year 13 - do well in the "university-like" culture we have at school.

12. The last question: In your own personal experience, what is it about Akademeia that makes it look and feel like a university?