

# University education makes students more agreeable, conscientiousness

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A recent study published in *Oxford Economic Papers* indicates that university education has a dramatically positive effect on the development of non-cognitive skills like conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness, in addition to the expected intellectual benefits. The paper also shows that the impact of education on these skills is even more dramatic for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

University [education](#) coincides with the transition from adolescence into young adulthood. The nature of this maturation process is toward increasing levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability and decreasing levels of openness to experience and extraversion. University training may alter this maturation process: Theoretically, it could boost, weaken, or even reverse population trends in personality trait maturation.

University education may impact character skills development by providing students with exposure to new peer groups and extracurricular activities including sport, politics, and art. Because students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be more affected by a change in peer groups through day-to-day interaction with academically inclined peers and academic groups, there may be a greater effect of university education on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

To measure character skills researchers used five personality traits—openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—which are widely accepted as a

meaningful construct for describing differences in character skills by psychologists. Some of these character skills- extraversion or openness to new experiences - are important for employers. Other character skills-like agreeableness - are related to preferences such as reciprocity and altruism, which are significant for personal health and wellbeing.

To identify the effect of university education, researchers followed the education and character skills trajectories of 575 adolescents over eight years using nationally-representative, longitudinal data from the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey. The data provide measures of character skills before potential university entry, and follow up measures four and eight years later.

The results indicate that every additional year spent at university is associated with increases in extraversion and agreeableness for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The results show that university education has positive effects on extraversion, reversing a downward sloping population trend in outward orientation as people age. It also accelerates an upward-sloping population trend in agreeableness for students from [low socioeconomic status](#), boosting agreeableness scores from the lowest levels observed at baseline to the highest levels at the eight-year follow up. This finding suggests that the causal mechanism is likely to operate through actual exposure to university life, rather than through academic course content. Such interpretation is strengthened by the observation that length of exposure to university life is positively associated with character development.

As yet, no empirical evidence has existed on the matter. This study provides a robust empirical look at the role that university education plays in skills development in adolescents. Australian universities contribute to building sociability ([extraversion](#)) and the tendency to

cooperate (agreeableness).

In addition, university education is associated with higher levels of agreeableness for both male and female students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who started from the lowest baseline scores in adolescence and experienced the steepest growth curve as they entered university. This implies that students from disadvantaged backgrounds catch up with their peers from more privileged backgrounds, thus reducing initial levels of inequality in [agreeableness](#).

"We see quite clearly that students' personalities change when they go to university, said the paper's lead researcher," Sonja Kassenboehmer.

"Universities provide an intensive new learning and social environment for adolescents, so it is not surprising that this experience could impact on students' personality. It is good news that universities not only seem to teach subject-specific skills, but also seem to succeed in shaping skills valued by employers and society."

**More information:** Sonja C Kassenboehmer et al, University education and non-cognitive skill development, *Oxford Economic Papers* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/oep/gpy002](https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpy002)

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