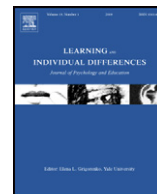




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# Can personality traits modulate student engagement with learning and their attitude to employability?☆

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## ABSTRACT

Student engagement in Higher Education is the focus of considerable research, particularly in terms of predicting educational achievement and retention. Less research has examined the predictors of engagement. The current study (students  $N = 117$ , staff  $N = 35$ ) explores the predictive role of personality in a multidimensional model of engagement. Given recent tensions between the importance of employability and the time academics have to deliver this, a second objective was to examine the correlation between student and staff perceptions of employability. Results found no differences between student and staff attitudes towards employability and further revealed that students' attitudes became less positive over time. Differential patterns of trait relations were found for components of engagement, though agreeableness and conscientiousness were consistent predictors. Findings of individual differences are encouraging in terms of integrating different practices so that different personalities can be engaged. Finally, the decrease in students' attitudes towards engagement and employability highlights important areas for future investigation.

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## 1. Introduction

The rising pressure in Higher Education (H.E.) for accountability in student learning (Bok, 2006) and enhanced retention rates (Fowler & Boylan, 2010) highlights a need to understand the key predictors of student engagement. Student engagement refers to enthusiasm, inspiration from study, and a mental resilience when studying (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002), and has been shown to predict key outcomes such as grades and persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2001, 2003) and students' learning (Mega, Ronconi, & De Beni, 2014). A number of variables such as IQ (Furnham, Monsen, & Ahmetoglu, 2009), preferred learning styles and instruction method (Zhang & Huang, 2001) have been associated with engagement, highlighting the importance of individual differences. In support, Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) suggest that activities designed to encourage engagement may not have the intended effect if not tailored to the individual. Similarly, if the specific aspects of engagement that need encouraging are not identified, the activity may not have its intended effect. Importantly, previous research focuses on engagement as a predictor of educational outcomes but less research has examined predictors of engagement. Given the oft cited role of individual differences

(Farsides & Woodfield, 2006) and student attitudes (Gaitán, 2012) in educational settings, the present study explores the relationship between students' personality traits, attitudes towards employability and student engagement.

The concept of student engagement has been defined in numerous ways and has its historic roots in work on student involvement (see Trowler, 2010). More recently, the term has come to be viewed as multi-dimensional with models of engagement capturing cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects (e.g. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Cognitive engagement refers to self-regulated approaches to learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional aspect of engagement includes feelings linked with learning activities such as interest whereas behavioural engagement refers to activity levels such as effort and persistence (Meyer & Turner, 2002). Supporting this, quality learning has been posited to rely on *behaviours* and *emotions* such as enjoyment of educational tasks, persistence and exertion (Meyer & Turner, 2002). More specifically, Skinner et al. (2008) have conceptualised engagement in motivational terms (i.e., students' active participation in the classroom; see also Pierson & Connell, 1992; Wentzel, 1993). However, Lawson and Lawson (2013) have argued that the concept of engagement should extend beyond institutional boundaries, as family, peer and societal relationships can impact on students' opportunities and interests. Given our focus on individual level factors such as attitudes towards employability and personality traits, the present study focuses on psychological aspects of engagement (e.g., attitudes towards employability and personality traits) at an individual level. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to investigate

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the role of individual differences on student engagement using a multidimensional model.

### 1.1. Individual differences and engagement: the role of personality

Research has predominantly focused on engagement as a predictor of objective outcomes such as achievement and grades rather than on engagement itself as the *outcome*. Given the negative relations found between engagement and outcomes such as burnout (Maslach, Schaufelli, & Leiter, 2001) there is a pressing need for research that directly examines the individual difference correlates of engagement. Hence, the present study explores the role of students' "Big-5" personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992) on their engagement. Big-5 or "the Five Factor Model" of personality (FFM: Costa & McCrae, 1992) has been accepted as the dominant model for categorising individual differences in personality (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). The FFM suggests that individual differences in behaviour should be classified in terms of five independent traits, namely extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and imagination; which reflect an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2008; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1997). The trait of extraversion encompasses facets such as sociability, assertiveness, activity, cheerfulness, and gregariousness. Agreeableness is associated with being cooperative, courteous, trusting, flexible, and kind. Conscientiousness denotes dependability, organization, persistence, delay of gratification and achievement-orientation. Neuroticism concerns facets such as, anxiety, and avoidance of stressful situations. Openness concerns flexibility in thinking, fantasy, openness to new ideas and interest in aesthetics (Costa & McCrae, 1992).<sup>1</sup>

The role of personality in academic achievement is well documented (e.g., Farsides & Woodfield, 2006). In particular, conscientiousness has consistently and positively been correlated with exam and essay performance whereas (Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Vialle, 2007; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007) neuroticism has been found to be a negative predictor of academic performance (Landra, Pullmann, & Allick, 2007) and examination performance (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003). Academic performance more generally has been associated with agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience (Poropat, 2009). Although the literature has yielded ambiguous results in regard to extraversion (Wolf & Ackerman, 2005), the relationship between FFM and achievement is relatively well documented (see Poropat, 2009 for a meta-analytic review). Nevertheless, the role of the FFM in student engagement has yet to be studied in depth.

Additionally, previous research has typically examined the role of personality on proxies of engagement such as retention (Moses et al., 2011), academic performance (Glass, Prichard, Lafortune, & Schwab, 2013), and learning approaches (Zhang & Huang, 2001). Support comes from a study by Komarraju and Karau (2005) who reported that the traits of extraversion and openness to experience were related to engagement. Limited research has found a link between agreeableness and engagement per se, but this does not appear to have been replicated, possibly due to differences in the operationalisation of engagement (see Caspi, Chajut, Saporta, & Beyth-Marom, 2006). Interestingly, research suggests that agreeableness may be related to the emotional regard a student has towards studying (Wise, Skues, & Williams, 2011) (see Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2002). Critically, these findings indicate the importance of examining a multidimensional model of engagement. In an effort to enhance our theoretical understanding of the nature of engagement, the present

<sup>1</sup> Although previous literature has used the terms emotional stability (the positive side of the neuroticism scale) and imagination interchangeably with those of neuroticism and openness respectively, we will only use the former terms.

study examines the relationship between personality and a multidimensional model of engagement.

### 1.2. Staff and student perceptions of employability and links with engagement

An area of increasing importance within the H.E. sector is that of *employability* (Cui, 2015; Lau, Hsu, Acosta, & Hsu, 2014; Yorke, 2004). The increasingly competitive graduate job market has seen an increased emphasis on Personal Development Planning (PDP) to ensure students are equipped with key employability skills (Quality Assurance Agency; QAA, 2009). Although there appears to be a consensus that employability is an integral part of PDP (Bill & Bowen-Jones, 2010; Bleetman & Webb, 2008), there is debate over what exactly employability encompasses (see Harvey, 2001; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). Yorke (2004) defines employability as "a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes, that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (p. 410). Interestingly, Holmes (2013) goes beyond Yorke's notion of 'skills and attributes' acquisition and makes the distinction between 'possessional' (c.f. skill acquisition; Yorke, 2004), 'positional' (focus on active learning experiences) and 'processual' (the learning process extends beyond University) employability (see also Cashian, Clarke, & Richardson, 2015; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Highly relevant for present purposes, research has shown that there is a lack of engagement with the concept of employability (Betts & Calabro, 2005; Milner, 2013; Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008). From a teaching and learning perspective, student (e.g., Gaitán, 2012) and staff (e.g., Powell, 2010) perceptions of employability have been shown to be important. Research suggests that employability/PDP is perceived as both useful (Powell, 2010) and negative by academic staff; the latter view including concerns about the pedagogic value being 'outside' academics' role (Clegg & Bradley, 2006). There also appears to be tension between the importance of employability/PDP for graduate recruitment possibilities and the time academics have to deliver such activities. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between staff and student attitudes towards PDP/employability (e.g. Brennan & Shah, 2003; Cosh, 2008; QAA, 2009), hence, these perceptions are crucial and warrant further exploration.

This study further investigates a less well-researched area: to what extent undergraduate students are engaged with the concept of employability, and how this may relate to staff perceptions of employability. Therefore, in order for the teaching of employability to be effective it is necessary to examine student *and* staff attitudes towards employability, representing the second objective of this study. Student attitudes will also be compared to their Big-5 personality traits to assess the potentially important role of individual differences, within employability initiatives.

In summary, the present study has two objectives (i) to explore the role of Big-5 personality traits on engagement of students and (ii) to contrast staff and student attitudes towards employability. As research has found differences in engagement and attitudes to employability depending on the year of study (Tymon, 2013) two time points were examined: beginning of Year one (T1) and the end of Year one (T2). Accordingly, we expect to find the following:

- An improvement in students' engagement, their understanding of and attitudes towards employability between T1 and T2 (H1)
- A positive correlation between attitudes towards employability and student engagement, as well as between staff and student attitudes towards employability (H2)
- A positive relation between Agreeableness and emotional engagement (H3)
- A positive relation between both Conscientiousness and imagination and each of emotional and cognitive engagement (H4).

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