

## The Role Of *Personality* In A Successful Boarding Experience

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Many factors can contribute to a successful and engaging time at boarding school. Broadly, we can distinguish between *student* factors, such as personality, and *contextual* factors, e.g. peers, the school climate/ethos, and boarding house leadership. In last month's *Lights Out*, we introduced a proposed collaborative project between ABSA and the University of Sydney. This project seeks to understand the effects of boarding school on academic (e.g. motivation, engagement, achievement, academic resilience) and non-academic outcomes (e.g. life satisfaction, positive and negative emotion, self-concept).

In our series of articles we consider the student and contextual factors which form part of the boarding experience. In this article we begin with students themselves, raising the somewhat provocative questions: Does attending boarding school suit the

personality of some young people more than others? Do some personality factors act as buffers against some of the challenges of boarding? What aspects of personality can we emphasise and foster to facilitate the boarding experience?

### **The 'Big Five' Personality Dimensions**

There's now considerable consensus among researchers about the broad structure of personality, with 5 broad, relatively stable dimensions being linked to a variety of academic and non-academic outcomes. These five broad factors are:

#### **Extraversion/Introversion.**

Extraverts tend to be outgoing, confident, and interested in people and events in the external world. In contrast, introverts are often focused on their own "inner life", and often prefer their own company. The dimension is captured in descriptors of extraverts as "talkative", "outgoing", and "energetic"

compared to introverts as "quiet", "shy" and "reserved".

#### **Agreeableness.**

This dimension has a strong focus on interpersonal relationships, and the extent to which a person feels a need for to be part of a larger community. The dimension is captured in descriptors such as "cooperative", "warm", and "sympathetic" versus "rude", "harsh" and "inconsiderate".

#### **Conscientiousness.**

This dimension captures the drive to accomplish goals, and is characterised by the degree of self-discipline, forethought, and carefulness. It is captured in descriptors such as "organised", "systematic", and "neat", versus "disorganised", "inefficient", and "untidy".

#### **Emotional Stability/Neuroticism.**

This dimension captures the nature of commonly felt emotions in people's lives. Emotionally stable people are often described as "calm", "poised", and "unenvious", compared to being "anxious", "tense", and "moody".

#### **Intellect/Openness to Experience.**

This dimension focuses on a preference for conventionality versus novelty and complexity in one's intellectual life. It is captured in descriptors such as "creative", "intellectual", and "complex", versus "direct", "practical", and "pragmatic".

### **How Do The Big Five Dimensions Relate to Education?**

The relations of the above personality dimensions to educational outcomes have been investigated in a very broad range of settings. Griffith University academic Arthur Poropat has recently published a major review of the research linking Big Five dimensions and general intelligence to academic performance. Aggregating results



from 80 research reports with over 70,000 participants, his major conclusions were as follows:

1. Overall, academic performance was significantly correlated with Conscientiousness (medium correlation), Agreeableness (small correlation), and Openness to Experience (small correlation).
2. Correlations between Conscientiousness and academic performance appear to be largely independent of general intelligence. That is, across a range of ability levels, more conscientious students learn more effectively than less conscientious students.
3. The pattern of the above correlations changes with age. Correlations of Agreeableness and Openness to Experience with academic performance were substantially higher in Primary school than in Secondary or University/College settings. In contrast, the correlation between Conscientiousness and academic performance was relatively similar across age groups.

In general, then, personality factors are associated with academic outcomes in a variety of ways, across a range of educational contexts. However, at present we know little about how personality factors play out in an important but under-researched context – boarding school.

### ***How Do We Assess Young People's Personality?***

There are a wide range of surveys for measuring the Big Five traits, either through self-reports, or through ratings given by someone who knows the person well. The majority of these surveys have been developed for use with adults, raising

questions about their suitability with young people. Recent work by US educational psychologist John Lounsbury and colleagues has provided a comprehensive Big Five personality inventory for adolescents - and which the proposed ABSA/University of Sydney project has been given permission to use. Across eight carefully designed studies, Lounsbury and his team refined the survey to ensure individual personality dimensions were measured validly and correlated Big Five scores against a range of educational outcomes (e.g. grade point average, absences, and behaviour problems).

These results are quite exciting for educational researchers, now allowing them to ask and answer important questions in the educational context that previously were difficult to address. Of particular relevance to our work, it enables us to ask and answer questions in the boarding setting, including questions around the role of personality in shaping students' boarding school experience.

### ***Personality and the Boarding School Setting***

While there is a large body of research examining the relations of personality to learning and performance, there have been no systematic investigations of these relations in the boarding context. A student's experience of boarding may depend to a considerable extent on stable personality factors. Based on previous research, some possible scenarios are as follows:

More conscientious boarders may cope with both scholastic and social challenges, as this aspect of their personality gives them the drive to focus on achieving goals regardless of the setting.

All other things being equal, more extraverted and agreeable students may thrive in the boarding context, while more

introverted students may find the context more challenging initially.

These effects may be influenced by the climate of the boarding house, with more supportive and nurturing environments acting as a buffer for more introverted students.

The effect of personality on academic outcomes may depend on the "fit" between the academic culture of the school (or house) and the student. For instance, boarders who are open to experience may be more challenged in boarding settings which are relatively controlling and do not focus on intellectual or personal discovery.

As the above scenarios suggest, the impacts of personality and the boarding setting on educational processes and outcomes are vital to understand if we are to optimise students' boarding experience. The proposed study will thus allow us to "tease out" how the personality of the student relates to academic and non-academic outcomes, in boarding and non-boarding settings. This will provide educators in both settings with valuable knowledge for supporting the broad range of students in their charge.

### **EXPRESSION OF INTEREST**

Expressions of interest are still being sought from schools (comprising boarding students) who wish to be part of this research project. Please contact Brad Papworth for further details: [b.papworth@edfac.usyd.edu.au](mailto:b.papworth@edfac.usyd.edu.au) or (02) 9683 8490.