

# Can academics change their students' personalities?

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'Character education', a concept that has taken off among schoolteachers, could be coming to higher education

April 27, 2016

- By [David Matthews](#)

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[Carol Dweck](#) is a psychology professor at [Stanford University](#) whose ideas on education have swept through schools. She insists that children who have a "growth mindset", a belief that through effort they can overcome problems and improve their own abilities, perform radically better in class – and in life.

In a [TED talk](#) that has so far garnered more than 4 million views online, she shares inspiring tales of pupils in tough, inner-city areas who have zoomed ahead after being trained to believe that their talents are not fixed.

And according to some, academics may soon be hearing a lot more about the theories of Professor Dweck and "character education", the attempt to change the behaviours and attitudes of young people to better equip them for life, rather than just imparting them with knowledge.

Whether universities should do more to instil qualities such as resilience and "grit" into their students was one of the key debates at a conference on the future of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects held in London earlier this month.

Johnny Rich, chief executive of the universities guide [Push](#), made the argument that institutions needed to do better at giving their students "social capital", by which he meant not just eating with the right fork but other, broader attitudes and behaviours.

"That is the one [area] where so little work has been done in higher education," he later told *Times Higher Education*. "We don't look at how we can transform the opportunities of a disadvantaged student."

During the conference – The Future of STEM Subjects in Higher Education – hosted by the Westminster Higher Education Forum on 14 April, Mr Rich praised the approach of [education secretary Nicky Morgan](#), who has championed character education in schools.

Lecturers might wonder whether character education is just another term for "soft skills", such as teamwork, communication and IT abilities, that are already on the radar of universities.

Mr Rich acknowledged that the two concepts are not completely distinct. But for him, character and social capital are deeper personality traits and behaviours – "emotional strengths and moral strengths", as he put it.

There was "a lot of evidence on the power of resilience over time as a stronger indicator of success than academic achievement", he said, while emotional intelligence and delayed gratification were also crucial elements of character education, he added.

One of the ideas to emerge from Professor Dweck's research is that children should not be told to "do their best" because this will lead them to be "satisfied with what they did last time" rather than stretching them further, Mr Rich explained.

The unequal distribution of social capital is all the more important after the release of an "explosive" report from the

Institute for Fiscal Studies that shows that graduates from wealthy backgrounds [end up earning more than equally qualified classmates](#), he argued.

He sees character education as a way to “level the playing field” for those who might otherwise be unfairly held back by class or background.

One of the difficulties, however, is that opportunities to develop attributes such as “grit” – extracurricular activities, internships, stints abroad and the like – are disproportionately accessed by the already well-off, explained Nik Miller, director of the Bridge Group, which researches social mobility.

Graduates also need to be able to reflect on and articulate occasions when they demonstrated resilience – in job interviews, for example – and this is a skill that private schools are particularly good at teaching, he added.

So how can academics “embed” yet another idea in their teaching?

“It’s much easier to talk about it than to actually do it,” Sir John Holman, emeritus professor of chemistry at the [University of York](#) and a prolific creator of science curricula, told the conference.

“It’s nothing like teaching mathematics. You don’t teach character education by sitting down in a room for a three-quarters-of-an-hour lesson. You do it by modelling it, by putting people in situations where they need to develop and demonstrate certain characteristics.”

Then there is the even more fundamental question of whether, by 18 years of age, individuals’ characters have become fixed. Mr Rich remains an optimist: “My personal belief is that people’s personalities are not set in stone.”

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