

2.3 Grit, civic engagement and academic success

1. Personality traits

The idea of personality traits is very old. Aristotle (384–322 BC), in his book *Ethics*, written in the fourth century BC, saw dispositions such as “vanity, modesty and cowardice as key determinants of moral and immoral behaviour”.

There are two key assumptions in everyday conceptions of personality traits. Firstly, traits are stable over time. Secondly, it is generally believed that traits directly influence behaviour. Our personality can predict our behaviour in the future. Brody (1994) considered that personality traits are causal. They are genotypically influenced by latent characteristics of people that determine the way individuals respond to the social world they encounter.

Allport (1937) saw traits as organised mental structures that vary from person to person, and that initiate and guide behaviour. The existence of a trait predisposes people to act and react in certain ways that become apparent over time. Situational factors are essential in moderating the impact of characteristics on behaviour. Therefore, it seems reasonable to enquire to what extent individual differences in personality traits are caused by genetic and environmental factors.

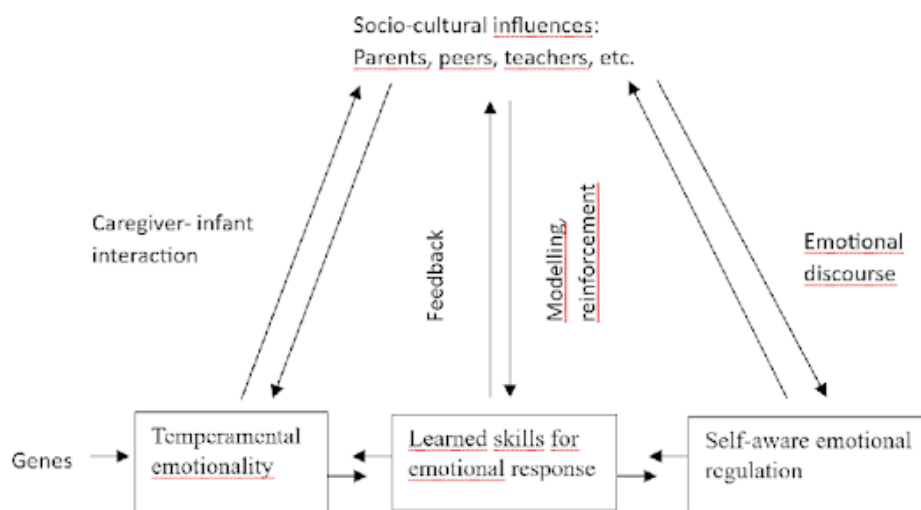
Suppose we focus on the interactions of personality and culture. In that case, further work on cross-cultural studies of traits and cultures also suggests that there are typical personality traits and dispositions of cultures that affect individuals' development within that culture (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004). Hofstede (2001) identified four dimensions that differentiate cultures: power distance (acceptance of social inequality), individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance (discomfort in ambiguous situations), and masculinity–femininity. Such findings raise a ‘chicken-and-egg’ question. Does culture affect personality, or does personality affect culture? Nowadays, there isn’t a clear response.

As mentioned before, a trait must have a degree of stability over time for it to be valid. However, many authors have found differences according to age. McCrae et al. (2000) have reported that between the ages of 18 and 30, mean trait levels of neuroticism, extraversion, and openness have been found to decrease slightly, whereas agreeableness and conscientiousness increase slightly. In addition, the same pattern of change over time was observed after the age of thirty, but to a lesser extent. Their data seemed to suggest that average levels of personality traits change very little after the age of 30.

Another important aspect is considering the possible link between personality and social behaviour. Bandura's modelling studies (Bandura and Walter, 1963) showed how social learning processes can produce dispositions, such as tendencies towards aggression. Moreover, Mischel (1999) considered individuals may display consistent behaviours in specific situations. The studies conducted by Matthews and colleagues have shown correlations between traits such as extraversion and

neuroticism and indices of cognitive appraisal, self-efficacy and self-reflective cognition (Matthews et al., 2000). It is well known that people represent social knowledge in the form of cognitive structures, such as schemas, that guide the individual's processing of the social stimuli provided by other people, and, hence, social interaction. In this way, social cognition is infused by motives, such as seeking consistency between beliefs and perceptions, and seeking explanations for events, as explored in attribution theory. Harré and Gillett (1994) described personality as the outcome of the person's attempt to fashion a coherent psychological life from everyday 'discourses': symbolic interactions within a framework of conventions and relationships. According to this point of view, the personality of the individual appears to vary dynamically according to the cues provided by others. Multiple levels of interaction between the child and their social environment, which become increasingly sophisticated as the child develops, appear to be involved in the development of emotional competence (Figure 1) (Zeidner et al., 2003).

Figure 1. Levels of emotional personality development (Zeidner et al., 2003)



In conclusion, both trait theories and social-psychological accounts of personality seek to explain individual differences in social behaviours such as forming friendships, acting aggressively and conforming to social and cultural standards. Stable knowledge structures, like the 'self-schema', encode beliefs and procedural skills. Both the content of stable knowledge (availability) and the extent to which social cues activate knowledge in the situation (accessibility) determine the extent to which items of social knowledge control behaviour in a given situation. A growing body of evidence suggests that some elements of social knowledge may be accessible across different situations, supporting behavioural consistency that may be related to traits. However, most social psychologists emphasise the contextual nature of social knowledge. Studies have shown that the interaction between the personality with which an individual is born and the social environment they develop shapes the person. From this perspective, it is important that children develop in environments that facilitate social engagement and foster perseverance in achieving their goals.

2.Engagement and purpose

In the previous section, we discussed how personality factors can make us more likely to be more persistent, more sociable or more committed to our society. But these personality traits do not only have a biological origin. The social environment in which a person develops will also have a

certain influence on the personality traits he or she eventually manifests. We should not forget that one of the functions of education is to enable the creation of a meaningful life. Going to university should involve immersion in a world of ideas so extensive and deep that it allows young people to broaden their vision. It should also equip them with the intellectual tools necessary to be able to solve complex problems facing our society at this time (Deresiewicz, 2014). This university environment must aim to make students think deeply about their social responsibilities, the value system they want to live by and the role they want to play in contributing to society. At the end of their university education, students should not only have found a meaningful life, they should have discovered a purposeful life. Thus, the university environment can offer the student a new perspective on the world and various opportunities to develop new skills.

The term "purpose" is considered an aspect of psychological well-being and is akin to having meaning in one's life or having goals and objectives (Damon, 2008). Based on these concepts, Damon et al. (2003) define purpose as "a stable and generalised intention to achieve something that is both meaningful to oneself and relevant to the community". From this perspective, the purpose is a multidimensional construct composed of the meaningful intention to which they aspire, the motivation that drives them beyond themselves, and the actions they take to commit to the stated goal.

University changes students' lives, not only in terms of teaching them a profession but also in terms of identifying purpose. In a study conducted by Malin (2022) he found that students with a social agenda, a clear goal orientation and prosocial motivation had a clearly defined purpose. This is why we must work on the emergence of purpose, as it will push us to develop our full cognitive, emotional and social potential.

3. Purpose, commitment and positive effect as predictors of grit

The importance of intellectual talent for success in all professional fields is well established. However, less is known about other individual differences that predict success. As discussed in section 2 of this chapter, psychologists have focused on understanding and measuring certain cognitive processes, such as intelligence. However, they have not focused on other qualities that may be determining for personal development. It should be stressed that a high level of intelligence is not always synonymous with success. Moreover, we know comparatively little about why most individuals use only a small part of their resources. In contrast, while a few exceptional individuals put all their resources to work to the limit to achieve their goals. In terms of identifying the people who tend to succeed, the most obvious candidates are the ones who are passionate about their long-term goals and persevere in their pursuit even in the face of obstacles. Researchers have defined this combination of passion and perseverance as 'grit'. Grit is considered to be a personality disposition that enables one to achieve goals, which is less dependent on the cognitive level of the learner (Duckworth, 2016). Grit, defined as the passion and perseverance to achieve one's goals, has been shown repeatedly to be an adaptive resource across multiple domains. However, the factors that influence grit are poorly understood. It has been shown that students with higher levels of grit have higher educational outcomes than others. That is, there is a positive relationship between grit and academic success. Positive affect and commitment to an objective seem to be two factors that determine the emergence of grit. Furthermore, having a life goal may help more than the positivity effect when predicting who is likely to become grittier.

Engagement is helpful as it helps them strive to achieve their life goals. On the other hand, positive emotionality should better prepare individuals to develop skills and abilities that promote motivation and subsequent success.

4. Spiritual intelligence

We begin this section with a definition of Spiritual Intelligence. Parks (2000) describes it as "the personal search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness and purpose and the realisation of spirit as the animating essence at the centre of life". (Parks, 2000). Gardner (2011) referred to it as existential or transcendental intelligence. Although he acknowledged its existence, he did not develop a definition or describe its characteristics. According to Zohar and Marshall (2001), this intelligence is the necessary basis for the effective functioning of both Intellectual Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence. These authors believe that our brains are designed so that our three intelligences work together and complement each other.

From this point of view, spirituality is thus a complex and multidimensional part of the human experience. The main effect of the development of spiritual intelligence is that it will produce a transformation in the person. This transformation will be global, as it includes *cognitive, emotional and behavioural* aspects. The *cognitive* aspect includes the search for meaning, purpose and truth in life, as well as the beliefs and values by which an individual lives. The *emotional aspect* involves feelings of hope, love, respect, inner peace, comfort and support. The *behavioural* aspect involves how a person outwardly manifests their beliefs and inner spiritual state.

Spiritual intelligence is considered to be a higher system of understanding reality. Emotional intelligence makes us aware of our own and others' feelings, enables us to recognise the situation we are in and allows us to respond appropriately to pain and pleasure. However, spiritual intelligence gives us the ability to decide whether we want to be in that situation or whether we want to change it.

Positive psychology focuses on human potential by emphasising positive experiences and positive personal traits, which are seen as human virtues and strengths. In positive psychology, spirituality can be seen as a human strength that is related to full and mature development. In order to reach this fullness, it is necessary to develop virtues and strengths that will allow us to reach positive states such as joy, hope, confidence or personal serenity (Carr, 2007). We can improve our spiritual intelligence by increasing our tendency to ask why, to look for connections between things, to be more reflective, to be more self-aware, more honest and even courageous.

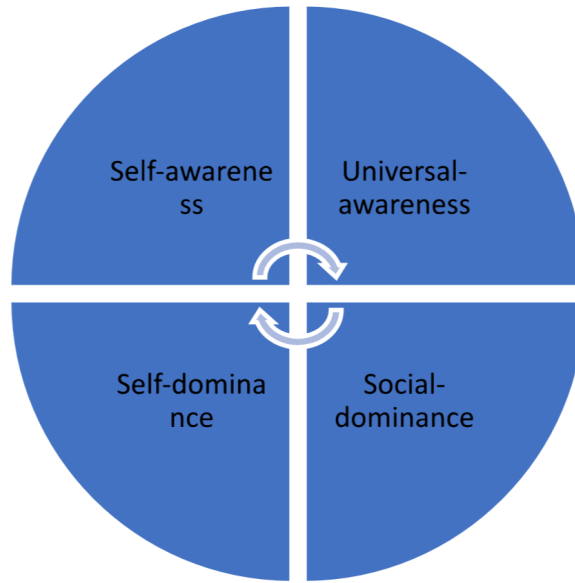
From this perspective, the virtues and strengths that would need to be worked on are:

- *Wisdom and knowledge*: creativity, curiosity, openness, love of learning and perspective.
- *Courage*: bravery, persistence, vitality and authenticity.
- *Humanity*: kindness or goodness, social intelligence and love.
- *Justice*: equity, leadership and teamwork.
- *Temperance or self-restraint*: capacity for forgiveness, self-regulation, prudence and modesty.
- *Transcendence*: appreciation for beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour and

spirituality.

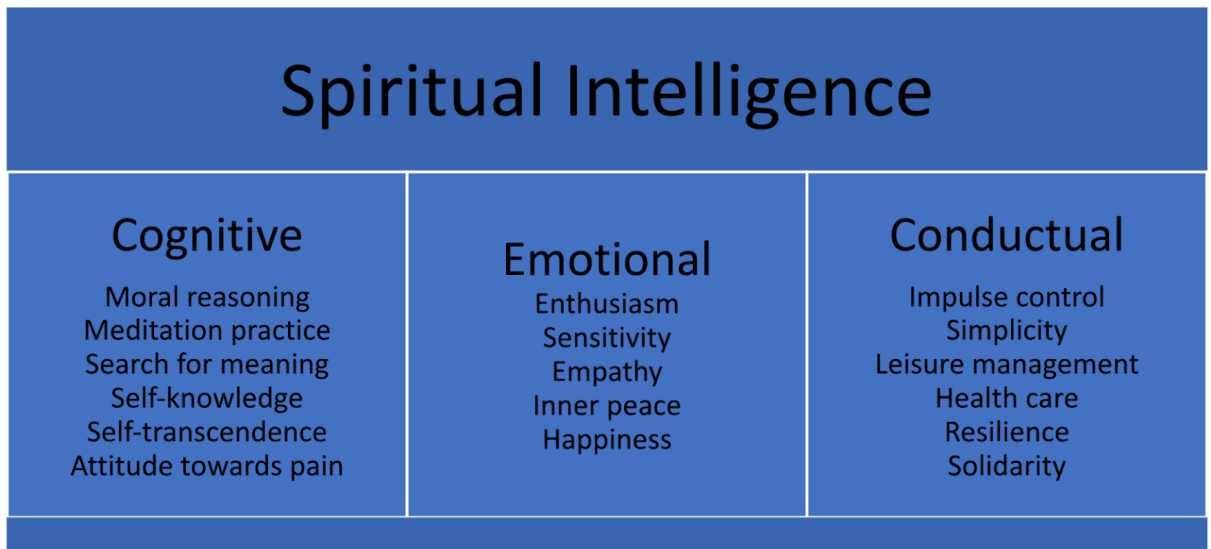
Different models of spiritual intelligence have been proposed in recent years. Wigglesworth (2014) describes a model of spiritual intelligence as the ability to act with wisdom and compassion. This author identifies four competencies that would make up spiritual intelligence (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Spiritual Intelligence Competencies according to Wigglesworth (2014)



On the other hand, the model proposed by Arias and Lemos (2015) is composed of three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioural. Each dimension is composed of six aspects (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Model proposed by Arias and Lemos (2015)



5.Values, passion and goal setting

Having a purpose in life is one of the existential needs of human beings. However, it is not always easy to find our purpose in life. This search for meaning becomes more complex in specific evolutionary periods of the human being, such as adolescence and early adulthood. Another aspect that makes it difficult to find meaning in our lives is letting ourselves be guided by what others think and becoming what others want us to be. This is especially evident in first-year university students. When I ask my first-year students why they chose to study, only 5% are intrinsically motivated. For the rest, it is because their parents have decided so since they didn't get the grades to enter another course, because they will have a comfortable and well-paid job, etc. However, studies that have addressed this issue tell us that students who have been guided by their autonomous goals will show greater well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Self-determination and intrinsic motivation become two fundamental pillars for achieving well-being and happiness. Studies indicate that the alignment of values and passions provides us with greater subjective well-being (Sheldon, 2002), greater vitality (Nix et al., 1999), higher levels of meaning (McGregor & Little, 1998) and a reduction in symptoms of depression (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). The achievement of self-imposed goals satisfies the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). These assumptions are not only effective in our society, but have also been found to be present in many other cultures (Sheldon et al., 2004). This search for subjective well-being where university students feel fulfilled is of particular importance in the current context. It could help us to reduce the number of young people with mental health problems. The search for life purpose is closely related to subjective well-being and reduces the level of stress, depression, anxiety and other psychological problems (Freedland, 2019). Thus, it seems that there are many benefits to be gained by enhancing meaning and purpose in life. But even if people recognise that they need purpose, the search for meaning does not automatically lead to its presence. On certain occasions, we may find that people search for meaning in life without finding it. This is most evident in adolescence. For this reason, several authors consider it necessary to include this search for meaning in university studies (Schippers et al., 2015). Another vital determinant for university students is that their goals are congruent. Studies indicate that well-being increases when students' goals are congruent (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Therefore, it is important to ensure that individuals reflect on and align their values with their competencies (Locke & Schippers, 2018). If people have not formulated their own goals, there is a chance that they will lose touch with their core values and passions" (Seto & Schlegel, 2018). Schippers (2017) argues that having a purpose in life is fundamental and has a ripple effect on all areas of life, including health, longevity, self-regulation, engagement, happiness and academic work performance.

Life decisions are difficult to determine and can be considered crucial turning points in a person's existence. This is why decision-making becomes an event dominated by stress and uncertainty. Young adults, in particular, are faced with making important decisions in a very short period of time (Sloan, 2018). These decisions will have a decisive influence on the future of these young people. Therefore, without the necessary strategies and competences to deal with them, many of these decisions will be wrong and will lead to failure for the young person who has made them. Young people should be accompanied at these crucial moments. They need to be helped to determine their goals clearly and be guided in achieving them. It seems to be proven that being clear about the goals we want to achieve makes us more resilient. Evidence shows that having a

sense of purpose provides greater centrality to a person's identity (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Studies have shown that when people pursue goals that align with their values and interests, instead of being pushed by others, their happiness increases (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). The development of life skills, such as the ability to set goals and make plans to achieve them (i.e., goal setting), increases students' resilience, well-being and success in their studies (Schippers et al., 2015; Locke & Schippers, 2018). Therefore, people must start thinking about their purpose in life as early as possible and repeat this process at all stages of life. Questioning our purpose is especially relevant when we feel we need to rethink our goals, such as going to university, starting a new job, etc.

Throughout this chapter, we have analysed factors that directly and indirectly affect the performance of university students. In the first part, we describe the soft skills and their implication in academic performance through the CASEL model. Subsequently, in the following sections, we analyse the influence of other factors such as purpose, commitment, personality traits and the three types of intelligence and how these influence the performance of university students. These variables must be considered for the university to successfully fulfil one of its most important missions, knowledge transfer. This transfer has to be carried out by people committed to their own personal development, to the development of the institution and to the development of society. Only in this way will we be able to successfully address the challenges facing our society.

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Co-funded by
the European Union

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The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. Project Number 2022-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000085944