



**LAIDLAW UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP AND RESEARCH PROGRAMME**  
**APPLICATION – 2022 COHORT**

Name	<i>Evan Carron-Kee</i>
Programme	<i>Philosophy, Politics, Economics and Sociology (PPES)</i>
Year of Study	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> year</i>
Research Project Title	<i>Does personality matter for assessed grades?</i>
Proposed Supervisor(s)	Dr Yekaterina Chzhen, Dr Kristin Hadfield

**Before completing this submission, you should review the [Laidlaw Programme Application Guide](#) and ensure you have included every component requested**

<b>Research Project Proposal (1000 words max.)</b>
<p><i>Word count: 1088</i></p> <p>During the covid-19 pandemic, governments in Ireland and the UK cancelled traditional final-year secondary school examinations. In their place, they introduced broadly similar systems of ‘assessed grades’, based primarily upon teacher assessments of students’ abilities. Evaluation of this new system forms a crucial part of assessing the negative effects of the pandemic on educational inequality and contributes to wider discussions of Leaving Certificate reform. This research will test a novel and interdisciplinary application of psychological trait theory to the sociology of education, with the potential to improve future large-scale studies on this topic.</p> <p><b>Literature Review</b></p> <p>One proposed mechanism through which SES improves educational attainment is ‘teacher selection’, whereby teachers are biased towards students with high cultural capital. These students have better relationships with teachers, encouraging greater school engagement and rewards from teachers such as attention, lenience, and higher grades (Wildhagen 2009). Cultural capital consists of the cultural tastes and ways of speaking, acting, and thinking which are inculcated in children from high-status backgrounds (Bourdieu 1973). These cultural attributes form a resource, cultural capital, which contributes to their</p>



educational success. Students from low SES backgrounds do not have this resource and find it harder to progress in their education. Thus, social inequality is reproduced.

The effect of teacher selection should be stronger under assessed grades, given that teacher assessments of students directly impact grades. Indeed, there is strong evidence that teacher assessments favour high-SES students. Anders et al. (2021) finds that students in the UK whose parents graduated college were advantaged more by teacher-assessed grades (as opposed to centrally standardised grades) than those without graduate parents. Having parents from an educated background increases the amount of cultural capital transmitted to the children, who are then rewarded by teachers when estimating students' grades. In a review of teacher assessments for 'predicted grades', which are used by third-level institutions in the UK but do not form part of the final grades received, Murphy and Wyness (2020) find that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are less more likely to be under-predicted in comparison to the grade they actually earn. There has been no direct investigation of this topic in Ireland, but there is evidence that teachers felt they did not have enough information to make clear decisions about grades, suggesting implicit biases and heuristics may have played a role (Doyle et al. 2021).

There is a need for a large-scale study which directly compares outcomes under assessed grades with outcomes under traditional exams, in order to investigate the impacts of the new system on equality. This research will be a preliminary investigation of the topic, seeking to refine the operationalisation of the teacher selection mechanism.

This study will build on the recent interdisciplinary work of Kaiser and Schneickert (2016), who integrated psychological work on personality (conceptualised as the 'Big Five' typology) into cultural capital research, finding an association between high SES, certain facets of Big Five traits (Focus, Intellect, and Curiosity), and higher grades. As these traits are transmissible between generations, are associated with high-SES backgrounds, and are rewarded by schools, they can usefully be considered elements of cultural capital. Kaiser and Schneickert (2016) did not investigate how these facets improved grades, however. If certain personality traits are associated with high-SES backgrounds and are



rewarded by teachers but not by academic assessments, then personality may be established as an important element of the teacher-selection mechanism. Indeed, Papageorgiou et al. (2020) found that in a Russian school for high achievers, certain Big Five traits (Conscientiousness and Agreeableness) were associated with higher teacher-assessed grades, but not with higher examined grades, establishing that in some contexts, teachers reward traits beyond those associated with test-taking performance.

## Research Question

This research will investigate teachers in the Irish assessed grading system rewarded students with certain personality traits (which are not associated with exam performance), and whether these personality traits should be considered an element of cultural capital. This can be expressed as two hypotheses:

*Hypothesis A: University students with high grades who received assessed grades have different personality traits to students who sat traditional exams*

*Hypothesis B: The traits distinct to high achievers under the assessed grades system are associated with high SES backgrounds*

If evidence is found to support either hypothesis, it could then be used as a basis for the inclusion of questions on personality traits in future studies on the impact of the pandemic on education. It would also suggest that work on the mechanisms through which SES influences schooling should include measures of personality in order to fully pick up cultural capital effects. Finally, if the second hypothesis is confirmed, it would raise doubts about the validity of teacher assessments in general, with consequences for educational policy in the area of Leaving Certificate reform

## Methodology

The key variables to be measured are parents' education and income, Leaving Certificate points, the type of grades received, the year the student sat the exam, and the students' score on the Big Five personality test. These will be measured through a self-completion questionnaire. To measure personality, I will use the 15 item Short Big Five Inventory. This



instrument is suitable for this study as it takes just over one minute, and is reliable, accurate and available for non-commercial use (Lang et al. 2011). Also, Big Five traits are relatively stable for young adults over this timespan (Roberts and DelVecchio 2000). Students will be selected through a cluster sample of courses available in Trinity across all four undergraduate years. With the consent of the lecturer, the survey will then be distributed to all students in the class. I have kept the survey as short as possible for this reason.

Dr Chzhen will advise me on survey construction, data collection, and analysis using Stata. Dr Hadfield will advise me on the personality element of the survey. The construction and distribution of the survey will occur before the end of term by necessity. However, all other work will occur during the summer break. Should covid-19 restrictions be reintroduced, the survey will be distributed in online classes as a web-survey, and results will be unaffected.

**Week 1:** Constructing and piloting survey, contacting lecturers

**Week 2:** Distributing survey

**Week 3/4:** Analysis

**Week 5:** Draft paper

**Week 6:** Expert feedback and final draft

This tests an original hypothesis about the mechanisms behind educational inequality, with clear implications for future large-scale studies in the area and for educational policy. It contributes to a wider effort in social sciences research seeking to understand the impacts of the pandemic on young people, and to formulate policy responses.

## References

Anders, Jake, Lindsey Macmillan, Patrick Sturgis, and Gill Wyness. 2021. "Inequalities in Young Peoples' Educational Experiences and Wellbeing during the Covid-19 Pandemic." CEPEO Working



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Bourdieu, Pierre. 1973. "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction." In *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change*, 42. Oxford: Routledge.

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Papageorgiou, Kostas A., Maxim Likhanov, Giulio Costantini, Elina Tsigeman, Mikhail Zaleshin, Anna Budakova, and Yulia Kovas. 2020. "Personality, Behavioral Strengths and Difficulties and Performance of Adolescents with High Achievements in Science, Literature, Art and Sports." *Personality and Individual Differences* 160 (July): 109917. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109917>.

Roberts, Brent W., and Wendy F. DeVecchio. 2000. "The Rank-Order Consistency of Personality Traits from Childhood to Old Age: A Quantitative Review of Longitudinal Studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (1): 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.126.1.3>.

Wildhagen, Tina. 2009. "Why Does Cultural Capital Matter for High School Academic Performance? An Empirical Assessment of Teacher-Selection and Self-Selection Mechanisms as Explanations of the Cultural Capital Effect." *The Sociological Quarterly* 50 (1): 173–200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2008.01137.x>.

<b>Leadership-in-Action experience proposal (500 words max.)</b>	
<b>LiA Category</b> <i>Delete as appropriate</i>	Category A: Central Laidlaw Foundation Project



	<p>Category B: Leadership Placement</p> <p>Category C: In-field application of research</p>
<p><b>Think Pacific Health Promotion Project</b></p> <p>This project would allow me to further develop my skills in interdisciplinary work, empathetic leadership, and project management, building on those developed throughout research project. In addition, this project deals with problems I am passionate about solving. The sociology of health is an avenue I am considering specialising in; I am a member of the TCD Public Health Society, and I have written on the topic for an upcoming issue of The Colloquium, a student publication for which I am an editor.</p> <p>Fiji suffers has unusually high rates of suicide and has a communicable and non-communicable disease (NCD) public health crisis. Any action to combat these crises must contribute to a larger, sustainable effort and should take a pluralist, interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, Think Pacific follow Fiji's National Development Plan in emphasising a multi-sectoral approach to understanding public health, integrating knowledge from diverse fields. For example, traditional, healthy foods have become more expensive in tourist hotspots in Fiji, contributing to the NCD crisis (Mangum and Mangum 2018). Phillips et. al (2018) note that narratives of 'personal responsibility' inform perceptions of health in Fiji, leading to dismissal of structural conditions (such as the high price of traditional food) which make healthy choices impossible for many Fijians. Communication to improve health outcomes in this area must draw on diverse academic work such as the examples from economics and sociology above. This project would develop my skill in communicating complex interdisciplinary topics in an understandable way.</p> <p>The mental health crisis in Fiji not only deserves an interdisciplinary approach, but also an empathetic and careful consideration of the thoughts and lived experiences of Fijians themselves. I regularly engage in evidence-based work in an academic context, but I would develop this skill further in Fiji. For example, gender role expectations placed upon young Indian-Fijian women are one of the reasons why suicides are so high among Indian-Fijians (Mathieu et al. 2021). Lifeline Fiji, a project partner, cite urbanisation and loss of community as the root cause of many of suicides. However, these problems cannot be</p>	



understood through reading academic papers alone. Real understanding requires an empathetic and sensitive approach, and this will be essential for any evidence-based interventions. This skill is crucial to the kind of leadership that I wish to develop. I want to lead respectfully, listening to the needs of those whom I wish to help.

Creating lasting change on this project will also develop the practical skills that I will have established throughout my research project. By dealing with problems of limited resources and tight time constraints in my research proposal, especially through my experience of primary data collection, I will be better able to work through these problems in Fiji, outside of the familiar academic context. Also, liaising with my supervisors will prepare me for more complex teamwork challenges in Fiji.

I would be very grateful for the opportunity to work with Think Pacific on this project. It is a project whose goals I truly believe in, and something which I can contribute to.

### References

Mangum, Tamara L., and \* Brian P. Mangum. 2018. "Social Epidemiology and Determinants of Health in Fiji: Social, Cultural, and Environmental Factors Influencing Public Health Status, Climate Change and Rates of Leptospirosis." *Biostatistics and Epidemiology International Journal* 1 (2): 34–38. <https://doi.org/10.30881/beij.00010>.

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