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Tuesday, 5 January 2016

## Students who believe they have more "free will" do better academically

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Psychologists are coming to realise that it's not just people's abilities that are important in life but their beliefs about their abilities. Much of this research has focused on whether people think traits like intelligence and self-control are fixed or malleable, with those individuals who endorse the idea of malleability tending to fare better at mental tasks and even at life in general, at least [as measured by their feelings of well-being](#).

Now a [study](#) in *Personality and Individual Differences* has added to this picture by showing that students who believe they have "free will" in the philosophical sense (they agree with statements like "I have free will" and "I am in charge of my actions even when my life's circumstances are difficult") tend to do better academically. The result suggests that it's not just people's beliefs about the nature of ability that influences their scholarly performance, but also their more fundamental beliefs about the limits of human choice and volition.

As an initial test of their ideas, [Gilad Feldman](#) and his colleagues began by asking 116 undergrads (a mix of Hong Kong Chinese, Chinese and international students) to rate how much free will they have on a sliding scale from 0 to 100 and then to complete a proof-reading challenge. The students who said they had more free will did better at spotting mistakes in the text, finding more of them in less time.

Next, the researchers asked 614 more students (again a mix of Hong Kong, Chinese and international) to answer questions at the start of their university semester about their free will beliefs, their self-control, and whether people's traits are fixed or malleable. At the end of the semester, the students who'd previously reported stronger beliefs in their free will tended to have scored a higher grade in their studies, and they received better performance appraisals from their tutors.

This free will/performance association was stronger than the links between trait self-control and academic performance, and between belief in people's malleability and academic performance. Moreover, the association between belief in free will and academic performance held even when accounting statistically for the influence of these other factors (it also held across age, gender and cultural grouping). However, belief in free will and trait self-control did interact – the very highest academic performers were those students who endorsed the idea of free will and who said they had a lot of self-control.

These findings add to [past research](#) that's shown the consequences of belief in free will, such as that people who believe more strongly in their own free will are better able to learn from their mistakes. Feldman and his team said "Increasing evidence suggests that the belief in free will is more than an implicit, abstract, or philosophical belief and that it holds important implications for both cognition and



Students who believe they have more "free will" do better academically



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behaviour." There is intuitive sense in this idea – one can imagine that a student who believes more strongly in their own free will will take proactive steps to deal with academic challenges, rather than submitting passively to failure.

Findings like these, if they can be replicated and established as robust, are exciting because in theory it should be easier to influence people's belief in free will (and other ability related beliefs) in ways that contribute to better academic performance, as compared with trying to shift their IQ, say, or boost their self-discipline. Taking a more sceptical approach, bear in mind that this was a cross-sectional study, so the causal effect of free will beliefs has not been established. It's possible that more intelligent, capable and otherwise advantaged students are simply more likely to believe in their own free will.



Feldman, G., Chandrashekar, S., & Wong, K. (2016). The freedom to excel: Belief in free will predicts better academic performance *Personality and Individual Differences*, 90, 377-383 DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2015.11.043

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Post written by Christian Jarrett (@psych\_writer) for the BPS Research Digest.

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