

# **Fostering wellbeing, achievement, and lifelong success in a scalable online topic: Implementing evidence-based psychological interventions that improve academic, psychological, and professional outcomes.**

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## **Abstract**

*Student wellbeing declines while at university. Our emerging initiative addressed this problem using the expertise of psychological scientists to develop curriculum that helps students learn and implement evidence-based strategies that increase resilience and the achievement of academic, personal, and professional goals. This curriculum was developed for online delivery to actively engage students in learning the evidence-based tools and practice using them over a semester. Initial results suggest our approach can address the triple concerns of student well-being, attrition, and work readiness within a scalable, adaptable, flexible delivery, elective topic.*

## **Introduction**

“I feel a lot of the time I am just keeping my head above water”

*First year student, pre-course feedforward, July 2016.*

Our passion as educators is for students (and our graduates) to be able to do more than barely keep their head above water, or worse, sink under the experience of university. The problem is clear – students struggle at university. They struggle to adjust to academic life and succeed in their studies. Students struggle in terms of their mental health, with almost 20% of an Australian sample of university students estimated to have experienced mental health difficulties and over 67% reporting sub-syndrome symptoms, with student mental health decline continuing through to their third year at university (Stallman, 2010; see also Andrew & Chong, 2011; Field et al., 2014; Larcombe et al., 2014). For example, at Flinders University approximately 18% of students drop out in their first year of study, and 10% in their second year. These problems are interconnected. As students adjust to university and work through issues such as “Do I belong here?” and “Can I succeed here?” (Lizzio, 2006) perceived failure at academic work can impact on mental health and vice versa, resulting in students feeling that they do not belong and do not have what it takes.

## **Method and Approach**

### *Goals of the Emerging Initiative*

We based our initiative to address three core concerns that currently occupy Higher Education conversation; retention, psychological wellbeing, and employability. However we wanted to provide an intervention for these concerns in way that was scalable (able to be accessed by the entire university if necessary), adaptable to various audience (pre-enrolment, first year, pre-placement, professional development), utilized the principles we were teaching about in our

teaching approach, and able to be delivered year to year with relative consistency and not reliant on a specific staff members personal skills/knowledge.

Psychology offers a range of knowledge and resources to help people learn, set and achieve goals, work with others, and develop their own psychological well-being. However, our observation as teachers is that these resources are often absent from the classroom, and are often unavailable to students outside of psychology or related fields. Furthermore these skills, and knowledge of these issues, are essential for all graduates, especially those who will find themselves working with other people. Our goal was to use the evidence based resources of psychology to design curriculum and resources that focus on university and first year experiences, but where resilience and achievement skills constitute a graduate capability that not only help you survive the stressors of university life, but also help you thrive in your professional beyond. Skills like management of stress, setting goals, maintaining motivation, dealing with your own and others' emotions, are part of core skills for work expected by employers.

Finally, we wanted students to engage in critical thinking about the science behind the concepts that can become popularised (such as positive psychology), encourage student to go beyond the marketing, and be open minded but critical consumers of some of these psychological 'products'. Our goal was that students not only improve their own surviving and thriving, but become more educated about the science (particularly of wellbeing and cognition) so that they can be a resource for those around them in a society that is continually offering well marketed (but not always empirically based) quick fixes.

#### *Basis in Good Practice*

Our approach was based in previous good practice. In response to the dual concern for students' well-being and success while at university, and for the work-readiness of our graduates beyond university, we developed curriculum for an online topic drawing on theory and resources by Cranney, Andrew & Morris (2016), including curriculum adapted from UNSW for SCIF0007 Science of Student Success, resources from the UQ MOOC on the topic of the science of everyday thinking, and additional resources developed by our team members own expertise in psychological wellbeing and cognition. However our challenge was to combine these resources in a way that scaffolded learning, provided opportunity for implementation and reflection, and created a learning community within a flexible delivery topic.

We used the attributes of online delivery to support students learning. For example the topic does not have traditional lectures, but rather each unit involves students exploring content from a range of sources (open access lecture, videos, interactive websites, government and organisational websites). We used careful timing (completion requirements for new tasks), four spaced deadlines across the semester (checkpoints), and scaffolding text to contextualise resources and the prompt deeper thinking. The combination of checkpoints and text fostered a sense of moving at one's own pace, but still with enough synchronicity for students to feel there was a sense of dialogue through the course, both with the resources, and with other students.

The result was an online elective topic called the Psychology of Surviving and Thriving. The topic has no prerequisites, and which is designed to increase student well-being and success at university using evidence-based strategies that increase resilience and the successful

achievement of academic, personal, and professional goals. The topic emphasizes real-life implementation of learning. The topic included 13 units, and each unit included five sections; (1) REFLECT - an initial teaser and reflection activity (quizzes, polls, self-reflection, short videos); (2) RESOURCES involved engagement with content (from a variety of videos, articles, websites, blogs), with guiding text to create dialogue between sources and encourage critical thinking, (3) ACTIVITIES involved applying or critically reflecting on the content, peer to peer reflections, activities where they practice communicating their learning to others, and (4) IMPLEMENTATION during which students practiced select strategies through the unit and then uploaded evidence of on completion (including activities via interactive platforms such as “The Desk”, and websites such as the Centre for Clinical Interventions). Finally there was a section on (5) FURTHER RESOURCES which allowed students to dig deeper into more advanced psychological science if they chose.

## Results

187 students enrolled in the topic in Semester 2, 2016. Typical first year psychology topics at Flinders have a non-completion rate of approximately 20%. This topic has had a non-completion rate of 6%. Further, students can choose not to attempt up to 4 of the required tasks but 76% of students chose to complete all tasks they have been assigned. We have observed a high level of engagement with the two optional assignments, with 85% of students choosing to complete them. Overall Student Evaluations of Teaching ratings show high levels of satisfaction and engagement (95% agreement “The learning resources were of high quality”; 97% agreement “I used the topic resources and materials to enhance my learning”; 94% agreement “I found the online resources to be useful for my learning.” However one dimension stood out for improvement – 46% of students wanted more or different feedback. In part this concern for feedback may have been due to the nature of the peer – peer marking used in the first assignment, and provides a point of reflection for future development. Qualitative feedback was collected. Students reflected on what they had learned in the course and remaining questions they had following the course, as well as open ended feedback. When we analysed the qualitative student feedback from all students enrolled in the topic in 2016 (direct quotes included in *italics*, each quote provided comes from a different student) several themes *emerged*.

### *There Was Something for Everyone*

The course is so diverse that students gain skills that are unique to their situation – when asked about what they have found helpful some identify units on note taking, study techniques, or procrastination, worry or interpersonal skills – in fact every unit was identified as helpful by various students. While not all components of the course were relevant to everyone, students found some parts of the course particularly relevant. Many students identified very specific struggles with a range of issues at the start of the course: worry, depression, anxiety, procrastination, perfectionism, and commented on having found strategies that worked for them through the course. *“In comparison to where I was half way through last semester, I think I have made leaps and bound in regards to both surviving and thriving, but that journey is by no means over yet.”* However even high achieving students, who felt they were already ‘thriving’ identified improvements. *“[I learnt] That I can train myself to study, and learn, in more effective ways—that I am not too old to learn new things.”*

### ***Students Applied their Learning***

Students also spoke about applying these strategies at university, home and work. For example one student wrote; *“Since I experience some levels of anxiety and stress at work, I will incorporate mundane task focusing (a mindfulness strategy) whenever I feel that my worry is distracting me from being in the present moment.”* Students wrote about re-engaging with friends and family, or recommencing hobbies. At university students wrote about improved learning outcomes across other topics.

### ***Students Appreciated the Online Delivery***

Feedback on the online nature of the topic has been overwhelmingly positive, that it was well designed and easy to navigate. Online delivery allowed students to tackle the topic at their own pace (within ‘checkpoints’ located throughout the semester). *“I was a little concerned doing an external unit because I struggle with technology...However, this unit is really interactive and after a just a few times I was happy with how to work the interface.”* Others specifically mention the online delivery as a strength because it helped them to keep studying through a season of personal difficulty, either because of health/mental health issues or because of life circumstances. *“It [the topic] ticks all the boxes.”*

### ***Students Expressed the Desire to Have Completed the Course Earlier in Their Studies***

Several students identified the wish that they had taken the topic earlier. One student wrote at the end of the course: *“My Burning Question. Why don't the theories, concepts, strategies, and activities from this topic form a mandatory, and core subject, for all students at this university?”* Feedback like this may suggest that a course like this has potential for university wide use. However, compulsory inclusion may be problematic. Issues like autonomy are likely to be an important ingredient for the psychological engagement required in a course like this.

### ***Some Students Did Not Make the Connection to Employability***

Given the course was pitched with an employability component, several students particularly identified they did not see how the course would *“help me get a job”*. This reveals a problematic understanding of employability and awareness of the desires of employers which we will explore in the future. However, for some students they could see this connection: *“Working as a nurse involves many stressors such as night shifts, sudden change in a patient’s condition and heavy responsibilities for taking care of patients. Therefore the knowledge I will [l]earn out of this topic is going to help me with sustaining well-being at the workplace... I want to become a nurse who can support patients ....”*

## **Discussion**

Moving forward we want to extend the aspects of the topic that allow students to see how these skills translate to employment contexts. This was a need identified specifically by students within the topic. When asked to reflect on one burning question several students identified questions about the application to employment and employability. It is students are yet to see where these skills apply, what kind of jobs these skills make them competitive for. For example, managing one’s own and other emotions is a key component of all management roles. One possibility that

we are looking at is through the inclusion of ‘talking head’ employer/employee videos that allow students to hear directly from a wide range of employees/employers about how the skills that are being taught are relevant or used in their workplace. The videos will be from a range of careers, including unusual/new/emerging jobs, which will cover a wide span of degrees. A video clip approach would keep the course scalable and deliverable in the online context. The rationale for this innovation is first, resilience and achievement skills constitute a component of employability. Skills like management of stress, setting goals, maintaining motivation, dealing with your own and others’ emotions, are part of core skills for work expected by employers. Second, retention and success at university is strongly related to vocational purpose and seeing potential career pathways and thus any attempt to increase retention should not only address well-being and learning, but also build awareness of vocational possibilities. Third, rather than leaving career feedback to extra or co-curricular spaces, reflections on employability needs to be contained within the curriculum.

### Questions for Group Discussion

1. Feedback – How can we improve feedback within online classes in a way that is scalable and meets learning outcomes?
2. Does the material cover core transition principles? What is missing and could be included.
3. What are the unique attributes of online delivery that can be utilized to address wellbeing and employability concerns?
4. In what practical ways can we better link learning outcomes and graduate capabilities within the course?
5. What adaption would need to be made if a topic such as this was adapted as a pre-placement topic or a pre-enrolment topic?

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