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**Primed, prepped and primed: Reflections on enhancing student wellbeing in tertiary education**

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## **Practice Exchange**

# **Primed, Prepped and Primped: Reflections on enhancing student well-being in tertiary education**

### **Overview**

*In this article, the authors describe the PERMA model of well-being and how it has been applied within the teaching provision at undergraduate level in a business school context. PERMA is an acronym for a model of well-being put forward by a pioneering psychologist in the field of positive psychology, Martin Seligman. According to Seligman (2011), PERMA comprises five important building blocks of well-being: positive emotions; engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. This article reports on the application of this model within the context of a business school undergraduate curriculum, as a way of helping students develop new cognitive and emotional tools. In these practice reflections, the authors discuss the important role that PERMA based experiential learning and teaching activities can play in undergraduate education programmes, as a means to enhance student well-being. The authors cite practical examples from undergraduate teaching, pastoral tutoring, and work placement induction, using PERMA activities to enhance student well-being.*

### **Introduction**

Well-being is a dynamic and complex concept. Well-being has been found not only to be an outcome of favourable life circumstances, such as academic success and satisfying relationships, but also a predictor of these outcomes (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). Well-being includes subjective, psychological, social and physical resources, as well as health-related behaviours (Dodge et.al., 2012; Seifert, 2005). The focus of these reflective case studies will be on overall well-being, since considering key aspects of well-being can aid educators in understanding the degree to which students are self-accepting, pursuing meaningful goals, with a sense of purpose in life, having established quality ties with others, are autonomous in thought and action, can manage complex environments to suit personal needs and values, and continue to grow and develop.

The PERMA model was developed by positive psychologist, Martin Seligman, and has been widely published in the highly influential 2011 book, "Flourish." "PERMA" stands for the five

essential elements that should be in place for individuals to experience and embrace long lasting positive well-being. These elements are:

Positive Emotion (P) - The experience of positive emotions in our lives such as love, peace, gratitude, satisfaction, pleasure, inspiration, hope or curiosity. In relation to teaching practice, it is important to ensure that the teaching experience offers many opportunities for students to experience positive emotions in their learning activities.

Engagement (E) - This refers to the ability and opportunity to have interests and personal or professional pursuits that can deeply captivate the regular occurrence of flow, thus giving rise to opportunities for growth. When students are truly engaged in a learning situation, group task, or team project, they may experience a state of learning flow.

Positive Relationships (R) - Having relationships with others facilitates the cultivation of friendships, connectedness, bonding, belonging and camaraderie. By encouraging social relationships and friendship groups within our teaching groups, we can encourage students to experience positive emotions. Thus, it is essential that there are sufficient opportunities available for students to cultivate a sense of belonging and connectedness in their modules and overall course.

Meaning (M) – This can refer to working towards, or believing in something that transcends ourselves and provides a valuable way to find meaning in our lives. Students can be encouraged to have meaning in their lives in a variety of ways, and they might be encouraged to work towards the greater good of their study group or the module group.

Accomplishment/Achievement (A) - Experiencing a sense of accomplishment, and striving to better ourselves in some way, leads to a sense of achievement in the individual. This might be in private life or, for students, it might be within the professional domain. Much of our educational practice focuses on supporting students to master specific vocational skills, achieving a valuable career goal, or succeeding in competitive events such as the graduate employment market. Thus, accomplishment is another key factor that contributes to our ability to flourish.

The PERMA model of well-being offers a starting point for living a fulfilled life. It can be used as a valuable framework that offers scaffolding for teaching activities in higher education.

Positive Psychology has inspired a range of new techniques and approaches (Cooke et al., 2016), but as with all models PERMA, (Seligman, 2011) has its critics. However, the authors believe that working towards the continual integration of Positive Psychology techniques (under the PERMA umbrella) will serve both the field and individual students.

### **Reflective case studies on the utilisation of ‘PERMA’ orientated activities**

#### **Positive Emotions - P**

The following case study notes the benefits of positive psychology tools as a way of enhancing learning, whilst equally impacting upon positive emotions. The student learning experience has been transformed by the introduction of a highly innovative level 5 module entitled ‘Applying the Tools of Positive Psychology to Business’ within a London based Business School. The impact of this research-informed and evidence-based practice approach is documented in module evaluation activities, capturing the students’ positive outlook on their overall learning acquisition and experience. The module was delivered as a combination of inspirational lecturing, covering the theoretical underpinnings of the subject discipline, and engaging seminar activities: either individual or group oriented. Students completed many reflective and co-coaching tasks, which helped practice the use of positive psychology tools in chosen business scenarios. In this module, imaginative teaching resources included the use of three psychometric tools and the presence of prominent guest speakers. Utilising psychometric tools (Strengths, Wellness and Happiness) provided students with invaluable insights for their personal development and future employability.

A key activity, included the use of a leading psychometric tool ‘Strengthscope’, which identified and measured individual strengths. ‘Strengthscope’ is a psychometric tool which has achieved registered test status with the British Psychological Society (BPS); thereby demonstrating a global gold standard in psychometric design. It is also used for managing strengths and for helping individuals to become aware of innate signature strengths and their application to work-roles and other areas of life. This is important, as strengths contribute to personal growth and lead to peak performance. Based on research into behaviour, preference, personality and motivation, ‘Strengthscope’ comprises 24 strengths, compiled into 4 clusters, which are the most closely related to performance at work: Emotional; Relational; Thinking and Execution.

Additionally, students completed the 'Wellness Profiling', which assessed their personal well-being in the areas of: physical activity, energy levels, nutritional awareness, weight management, career choices, stress and resilience, relationships and team working. 'Wellness Profiling' contains 9 dimensions and 44 subcategories. It is used as a starting point for considering individual behavioural change and for encouraging students to reflect upon their personal wellness management, by clarifying goals and deciding on wellness development activities.

Students also completed the 'iOpener People and Performance Questionnaire' that assessed their level of happiness at work, perceived as a mind-set which allows individuals to maximize performance and achieve their potential (Pryce-Jones, 2010). It consists of 25 items and is designed to help individuals understand what influences their performance at work; with happiness at work seen as a key driver of performance. Achieving a sense of happiness at work is interconnected with feeling energized, using strengths and skills, being successful in a career and overcoming challenges. The 5C drivers of Happiness@Work consist of the 5 components that help an individual achieve their potential. ~The 5 are: Contribution- a feeling of making a difference through individual or team effort; Conviction - motivation in the moment; Culture – the social environment and feeling fit at work; Commitment - dedication to work, and Confidence - belief in own abilities. Key benefits of happiness at work seem to be openness to feedback, creativity and innovation, long-term career success, as well as, mental and physical well-being (Lutterbie and Pryce-Jones, 2013).

The main purpose of using these psychometric tools was to aid students' learning processes, enhance personal and professional development and improve their psychological well-being. The 'Wellness Profiling' tool helped the students in understanding the importance of their well-being from the holistic perspective, while the 'iOpener People and Performance Questionnaire' assisted them in recognising the impact of happiness on raising levels of confidence and self-esteem. The role of the 'Strengthscope' facilitated students to become more aware of their individual signature strengths, the use of strengths within a team environment, and to raise personal performance (Linley, 2007). A deeper understanding of strengths can help to achieve higher self-efficacy: a key component of psychological capital, by enhancing their subjective and psychological well-being (Youssef & Luthans, 2010). This aligns with Bandura's (1994) claims that, self-efficacy gains can foster positive well-being and human accomplishments. The students gained knowledge on the importance of goals, strengths and positive thinking. They

also became mindful of the role of positivity in their personal growth (Frederickson, 2009). This was imperative for their well-being, as proposed by the PERMA model.

Furthermore, students became conscious of the crux of their problem-solving capacity; by focusing on positive emotions, individuals tended to process information quicker and were less likely to jump to conclusions, as the Broaden and Build theory of Positive Emotions suggests (Fredrickson, 2009). The module participants' gained enhanced capability to plan future events and were more likely to align their behaviour with real world business objectives. Overall, the use of psychometric tools aided students' personal empowerment and enhanced their future employability. Students' testimonials clearly illustrated these findings. To summarise, in relation to teaching practice, it is important to ensure that the teaching provision offers opportunities for students to experience positive emotions in their learning activities, and to apply them in their future overall development.

### **Engagement - E**

This reflection highlights how pastoral support initiatives, based on the PERMA approach, can lead to increased levels of student engagement. Universities have many initiatives to support students but much more could be undertaken around the priority of mental health and wellbeing. According to the Higher Education Network (2017), almost 9 out of 10 (87%) of first year students find it difficult to cope with the social or academic aspects of university life. Students are unsure of what to expect, with a large proportion saying that the transition from school to university is a source of considerable stress. The stress of studying is a key area where students struggle, with almost 6 out of 10 reporting that this made it difficult for them to cope.

Consequently, the well-being of students at university is important for influencing students' later attitudinal and career outcomes, but also the outcomes which benefit communities and society at large. An initial experiential application of an Integrative Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching model (ICBC) was introduced into pastoral support. The aim of the personal tutor, moved away from students' problems and weaknesses and towards enhancing self-awareness in relation to signature strengths and positive thinking. By placing emphasis on positive psychology and strengths, students were facilitated to develop self-management skills, positive engagement and increased psychological well-being (Dias, Palmer and Nardi, 2017). This ensured engagement in the current academic year and equally fluid transitions between academic years and throughout their university degree (Awang et.al, 2014).

The holistic methods used were ICBC, Solution-Focused coaching approaches and Positive Psychology initiatives (PERMA; strengths based approaches, mindfulness exercises & self-compassion breathing approaches). The rationale for these holistic approaches was based on the assumption that cognitive behavioural approaches can reduce negative thinking and strengthen the acquisition of new learning behaviours. Solution Focused Coaching (SFC) looks at the clients' subjective understanding of their preferred future, and positive psychology helps to identify values and strengths for the development of a meaningful and purposeful life.

These approaches were applied over an 8-month period, on a one to one basis and included 3 to 8 sessions with 12 undergraduate personal tutees. Ages ranged from 18 to 25 years and included 6 males and 6 females, of varied ethnicity. The number and length of sessions depended on the individual's requirements. For example students had one-hour weekly sessions to tackle ongoing problems or longer two hour sessions to deal with performance anxiety, regarding forthcoming examinations. Student issues covered career dilemmas, examination stress, anxiety, perfectionism, poor time management, family issues; mood swings, panic attacks, low self-esteem and self-critical behaviours. Flexible, holistic interventions were used in collaboration with students. This allowed for varied interventions specifically tailored to each client; hence enabling the student to take ownership of their issue and become more confident in independently applying learning to similar or other related issues.

As a result, the first-year tutees found the positive psychology intervention, including mindfulness and self-compassion exercises, to be beneficial with regards to general day to day engagement with learning activities. This led to increased positive mental well-being. On completion of the intervention, 10 out of 12 tutees successfully graduated or progressed into the next academic year. Two students needed further sessions and signposting, due to learning difficulties and issue complexity. The feedback received from students suggested increased independence, self-reliance and confidence in managing life and goal achievement: resulting in higher levels of engagement in academic life.

This initial experiential application of these integrative methods does require more formal research to demonstrate efficacy. This is particularly pertinent for students with disabilities or mental health issues.

## **Relationships - R**

For this case study, the human condition of relationship building was a key focal point. The level 6 'Coaching and Mentoring' module has been in operation in a London based business school for 6 years and was introduced as a university elective in 2017. Students spend two-thirds of the module in seminars/workshops, carrying out practical skills-based developmental activities, with one-third of their time occupied by theoretically driven lectures. A reflective case study and portfolio assessment diet was used which permitted students to record their personal reflections and competency development. The module was delivered intensively, over a 12-week period. Although providing a strong academic component, the module was primarily skills-based and driven by a range of innovative, emotion-based teaching activities. The module was based on peer-assisted learning and reciprocal peer coaching methodologies, as allied to coaching psychology principles (Palmer, 2008).

Reciprocal peer coaching (RPC) is a form of collaborative learning which encourages individual students to coach or mentor others, so that the outcome of the process is a more rounded understanding and execution of skills and tasks (Ashghar, 2010). The learning and teaching strategies are self-directed through shared relationship learning interventions, discussions and feedback in pairs or triads. Reciprocal peer coaching permits a deep conversation and is highly influenced by the psychosocial aspects of the relationship (Ackland, 1991). Fundamentally, equality drives the relationship and the focus is on specific goal achievement. The feedback given is non-judgemental so as to help students undertake experiential reflection (Ladyshefsky, 2014).

The use of reflective practice in coaching and mentoring helps students to develop deeper insight into the problem-based learning tasks, that real world coaching and mentoring client work provides (Williamson and Haigney, 2009). The students learn to build relationships with each other and undertake many active and creative learning-based teaching activities (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2015), both in seminars and in their relationship dyads. In the classroom, it is vital to ensure that students have a range of options for motivating their personal learning. Williamson and Haigney (2009) indicate that learning should be structured around a choice of activities that appeal to students. They comment that learning has to be interesting and linked to current affairs and the human condition. Furthermore, they indicate that treating students as individuals, with individual life stories, can induce emotional responses in others whilst increasing students' learning awareness. Consequently, a range of creative learning-based

activities were used: team building activities, bonding exercises, learning styles analysis, trust exploration, coaching cards, wheel of life app, creative drawing, perceptual position taking, positive psychology tools, cognitive behavioural techniques, holistic coaching approaches and emotional intelligence exploration, that all help students to explore the efficacy of the emotional based work implicit in reciprocal peer coaching and mentoring relationships. Additional attributes of reciprocal peer coaching include listening, questioning and summarising skills, as posited by (Zeus & Skiffington, 2006). The relationships allow students to share their emotional journey, as they explore and discover new coaching and mentoring theory, skills and tools. Overall, the reciprocal coaching and mentoring relationships offer an opportunity for students to utilise a range of innovative emotion-based teaching activities (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2015). Students learn to embrace their emotions, both positive and negative, as a valuable discussion and debating point; in addition to enhancing their own emotional growth and personal and professional development.

Module evaluation analysis with seventy students indicated that authentically connected relationships, as in reciprocal peer coaching relationships, had a significant impact on student well-being. Three key conceptual dimensions emerged from the interpretation of the student qualitative questionnaires. The first conceptual dimension related to the process of reciprocal peer coaching: the key factors that contributed to the facilitation of the relationship. The second conceptual dimension related to the learning process, or the extent to which students engaged in the experiential learning process. Finally, the third conceptual dimension referred to cognitive developments, meaning the extent to which knowledge and competencies were enhanced as a result of participating in reciprocal peer coaching. A key conclusion is that relationship building can support students' development of important stress management techniques, build resilience skills and enhance their personal well-being levels. Overall, developing a culture of mutual relationship building, support and exploration has become a vital component of successful peer relationships. Thus, it is crucial to note that, emotion based learning activities offered the students an opportunity to build strong relationships, which will serve them well in their professional relationships.

### **Meaning – M**

Meaning in life can be enhanced by numerous tools and techniques. This case study documents how students were helped with this aspect of well-being by considering the

initiatives that were offered in the level 5 module ‘Work and Organisational Psychology within the HR Context’, and through personal tutoring provision.

Lectures were delivered on various topics, one of which focused on well-being in the workplace. This lecture introduced the concept of ‘stress’ and contextual facts and figures indicating the current picture in organisations today. The lecture then went on to focus on well-being, not only within organisations but also at the individual level. A model of resilience focusing on: confidence, social support, adaptability and purposefulness (Roberson and Cooper, 2016) was compared and contrasted with the PERMA model. These models were offered as tools to facilitate the exploration of student well-being. Concentrating on deeper meaning in life was recommended as a key focal point.

Following the lecture, students undertook a workshop where they completed a personality questionnaire on determining Type A (driven, competitive) or a Type B (more laid-back) Rosenman (1977). Further discussions focused on what the significance of their results meant for personal health and if this had any significance for meaning in their lives.

Later in the seminar work, general questions were explored on how students currently cope with stressors. The focus afterwards shifted to how students could specifically improve their coping skills to facilitate reduced stress levels by considering what could be changed and what could not. Regards ‘what could not be changed’ a further related point came out of the discussion on wider deeper meaning and putting life and situations into perspective. It was noted that one way of having meaning can be seen through attaching the self to something greater than the self, often with the sense that there is a larger purpose to life.

In addition, students completed an exercise on the specific real-life stressful situations that they experienced, these thoughts were written anonymously on sticky notes and then randomly re-distributed, followed by an ‘advice session’ from other students. Finally, the lecturer went on to consider the student-to-student advice and elaborated further by referring to theory and deeper considerations related to stress and its meaning where relevant. Students commented that this had been a very useful practical exercise as it had enabled a broadening of previous narrow ways of thinking about particular situations.

During this workshop students were also offered an optional exercise on mindfulness breathing. None of the students who chose to participate in the mindfulness breathing

exercise had ever practiced any mindfulness before, so it was not expected that a strong sense of meaning would emanate from this one-off taster session. Comments indicated that initial feelings of calm had arisen. It was hoped that those students who found this experience particularly interesting or pleasing would follow-up on further sessions when they were offered.

With generally well-accepted evidence in the literature on the benefits of mindfulness, students were offered a series of mindfulness drop-ins sessions as part of the university's pastoral provision. 'Mindfulness is a way of paying attention, in the present moment, to yourself, others and the world around you' (Chaskalson, 2011). In the late 1970s Jon Kabat-Zinn, largely credited as having brought secular Mindfulness to the Western world, developed and introduced the Mindfulness based stress reduction programme (MBSR). He also wrote one of the founding books on mindfulness, aimed at coping with stress, pain and illness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It is important to note that in order to feel the benefits of mindfulness, it is crucial to engage in regular personal practice as advantages cannot be gained from just reading about the subject.

Week by week mindfulness practices were introduced, building on previous exercises and activities. These ranged from: mindfulness of the breath, breath and body activities, sounds, and thoughts. There were a core of students who attended each week and comments collected indicated that the drop-in sessions had been truly beneficial to them. This was especially demonstrated by one student who was initially resistant to mindfulness practices and so did not attend but was then subsequently persuaded by a friend to try it. This student totally changed their views and became an enthusiast and attended all remaining drop-ins and then planned to continue with personal practice. Further comments received from students demonstrated that in just eight weeks, the mindfulness sessions had provided: a sense of inner peace, an increased sense of personal control in life and a definite sense of purpose and meaning.

### **Accomplishment/Achievement – A**

Mahmood et al (2014) compared student perceptions of graduate employment both before and after taking a placement year. Overall students perceived the employability placement to be beneficial with post-placement students able to use more concrete terms. The authors suggest that there needs to be emphasis placed on training students how to demonstrate the skills they

have developed through the work placement to potential employers. This case study further develops this notion. At a London based business school, undergraduate students choose to take a one year placement between level 5 and 6. Students are supported into placements with preparations for the recruitment process, tailored to student needs and achievement motives (Strandler et al. 2014; Trede et al. 2012; Pegg et al. 2012). They are supported via workshops, whilst they are at work, and have one to one supervision throughout the placement.

This case study explores placement students' sense of achievement, using Rock's (2008) SCARF reflective practice technique. A strong sense of achievement drive is facilitated by encouraging a positive attitude to feedback, developing maturity, utilising a reflective practitioner approach and by inducting the placement students into the critical incident technique (CIT) using a workshop method (Sharpless et al.,2015). Workshops were framed around Rock's (2008) SCARF model: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness, to explore students' CIT reflections and achievement motives. During the workshops, students commented on their 'status', if this was difficult, or made them feel devalued or unseen, students were prompted to recall positive incidents. The 'Certainty' level was addressed by breaking down goals into steps, identifying and where best to focus attention. 'Autonomy' was developed by setting specific achievable goals. The 'Relatedness' levels encouraged students to identify, and connect with those who could specifically support goals to fruition. 'Fairness' was the most challenging level, with students required to suspend their own position, and to consider how the incident might appear to others. This helped students to manage up, build better relationships and appreciate their role within the team. Focussing on one incident, student dyads asked each other probing questions using the SCARF technique. This empowered students to achieve a sense of control over challenging incidents, whilst facilitating assessed reflections.

One way of tapping into student achievement motives is to develop student professional identity. Trede et al's (2012), meta-analysis on professional identity development in Higher Education notes, the onus on universities to develop students' professional identity, a term that is greatly disputed. The consensus view is that students' move from studying to performing their profession; creating what Barbarà-i-Molinero et al (2017) call an alignment to project tasks and professional identity. Peel (2005) suggests that we inhabit many identities, contributing to our "sense of self": including ourselves as learner or professional as well as broader identity indicators.

By exploring professional identity formation and career achievement drivers, students were encouraged to achieve valuable career goals. Based on follow up conversations with placement students, it can be posited that students were engaging with the complexity of the work-based environment as a performing professional, with little allowance for their inexperience, this might be construed as encouraging students to engage with a business acumen funnel (Pegg et al., 2012; Chhinzer & Russo, 2018) and equally work towards achieving valuable career goals.

From participating in the career achievement orientated workshops and work placement, students learned to accommodate a range of disparate learning experiences and work towards professional competence (Wisker, & Claesson, 2013; Malcolm & Zukas, 2009). This required positive relationships; whilst drawing on existing performed identity strengths (Peel, 2005; Derounian, 2011). Chhinzer & Russo (2018) found that employers value academic achievement and problem solving, but also soft skills and maturity too. Students gained these throughout their career achievement orientated workshops and work placement experiences, by recognising excellence in others, by role modelling off managers and finally by drawing on key core strengths they had been unaware of. Self-reflective practice benefited the students' with regards to their emergent career drivers and professional identity, as documented by (Nosich, 2012; Kuijsten, 2008; Hulme, 2014). Placement experience engendered confidence in learning, further benefitting the students' transition to work-based project research (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008; Healey & Jenkins, 2018); whilst facilitating the skills employers value (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Ryeng et al. 2013).

Overall it could be noted that placement students moved from appreciating meaning and purposeful existence, towards achieving performance level flow. "Flow" or "the zone", is the mental state of operation wherein an individual on task is fully immersed in a feeling of energised focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity" (Nakamura & Csikszentmihályi, 2014).

## **Conclusions**

Overall, PERMA influenced curriculum offers' significant value in helping students to embrace developmental, self-regulatory processes in relation to well-being. The range of interventions employed support the flexibility of the PERMA model and its potential usage across future cohorts. It allows educators to re-imagine student psychological support to effect appreciable change. However, it must be noted, that student engagement with the various

teaching activities was variable due to developmental differences, maturity levels, self-awareness differentials and support network constellations (Green, Norrish, Vella-Brodrick and Grant, 2013). Clearly further work in this area is needed. These studies serve as pilot studies; suggesting the potential of utilising the PERMA model within the Higher Education context.

However, by offering these wide-ranging initiatives it was felt that, as a team, we were able to demonstrate to students that there are numerous positive psychology tools, techniques and models available. As educators part of our remit is to encourage students to become independent learners. Through the encouragement of student self-exploration it was hoped that further effective ways to enhance student personal well-being would, not only be maintained, but continued beyond our team inputs.

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