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Towards a positive university

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This article explores the concept of a ‘positive university’. Whilst positive education is becoming a better known concept, particularly applied to secondary schools, and positive organizational scholarship is further assisting the understanding of positive institutions, it is useful to examine the university as a special institution, in its entirety beyond a circumscribed focus on student academics (e.g. student motivation) or student well-being (e.g. well-being of medical students). In this article, we will sample the relevant evidence to date from positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship and apply it to five key environments of the university: Classroom and formal learning environments (e.g. curriculum, academic achievement), social environments (e.g. student relationships), local community and external organizations (e.g. volunteerism), faculty and administration work environments (e.g. employee stress) and residential environments (e.g. student well-being). Specific recommendations are provided for each context with reference to five routes to well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

Keywords: positive education; positive organization; academic success; happiness interventions; higher education; positive psychology; well-being

Positive Education has been defined as ‘education for both traditional skills and happiness’ (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). We offer a broader definition as we believe that education is broader than skills, and needs to emphasize the importance of learning environments. Hence, the working definition for Positive Education for this article is ‘the development of educational environments that enable the learner to engage in established curricula in addition to knowledge and skills to develop their own and others’ wellbeing’. In this article, we apply the concept of positive education to the tertiary sector, the institution of the university. This includes not only the educational context, but also the generation of knowledge through research, the staff and students engaged in those endeavours, the existing organizational climate and culture, and the communities in which the organization exists. The emergence of a positive university requires an expansive systemic level understanding of tertiary institutions, one that extends beyond traditional, transactional understandings of the teacher–learner relationship.

A positive university needs to be a positive institution, insofar as its activities enable key stakeholders to utilize positive traits (e.g. strengths) in the service of individual, joint and collective goals. Furthermore, this should be done in such a way so as

to increase positive emotions, meaning and engagement and decrease mental illness (e.g. stress, depression and anxiety). This is the context in which positive education will be enabled. However, as Schreiner, Hulme, Hetzel, and Lopez (2009) point out, a strengths-based educational approach at the tertiary level will quickly descend into faddism unless it is informed by relevant fields of scholarship, such as education, psychology, social work and organizational theory and behaviour.

The challenge and the opportunity

Historically, universities have sought to create cultures of excellence and peak performance. Whilst, *prima facie*, these would seem to be consistent with positive psychological principles and practices, in many cases, university environments continue to report significant student dropout rates and levels of psychological distress.

Some guidance for the development of positive universities can be gained from recent work conducted within the secondary school context. For example, Seligman et al. (2009) argue that well-being should be taught in secondary schools for three primary reasons: (i) as an antidote to depression, (ii) as a vehicle for

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increasing life satisfaction and (iii) to improve learning and generate creative thinking. We believe these reasons also have relevance in tertiary education contexts, albeit applied within an expanded systemic framework that encompasses the whole organization (i.e. staff and students).

Universities seem appropriate places to explicitly and implicitly address the well-being needs of its constituents and situate those efforts alongside its traditional teaching and research activities. The science of well-being itself is of growing scientific interest to universities. For example, Cambridge University's Institute of Well-Being is an inter-disciplinary Institute dedicated to advancing the scientific understanding of well-being and applying this new knowledge to help people and institutions develop their full potential. The Institute defines well-being as positive and sustainable characteristics which enable individuals and organizations to thrive and flourish (Well-Being Institute, University of Cambridge). Well-being is a dynamic concept that includes subjective, social and psychological dimensions as well as health-related behaviours. Universities and schools have similar capacities for cultivating prosperity, which we understand as wealth and well-being for the nation. The educational benefits of well-being seem clear (Seligman et al., 2009) and a meta-analysis of positive psychology interventions conducted by Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009; $n=4266$) suggested that such interventions significantly enhance well-being and decrease depressive symptoms.

Given the high striving culture of most universities, it is easy for individuals (both students and staff) to neglect social relationships, emphasize extrinsic motivation (e.g. grades/promotion) over intrinsic interest (i.e. learning/innovation), work excessive hours and engage in other patterns of behaviour that diminish well-being over both the short and long term (e.g. drug use, inadequate sleep). As such, there would seem to be an opportunity for positive psychology to enhance the experience of campus life by influencing the development of a higher educational culture that understands the psychosocial determinants of well-being (e.g. positive emotions-traits-institutions) and seeks to create conditions that cultivate well-being in students and staff.

Growing evidence suggests that the cultivation of well-being might be beneficial within university environments. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) suggested that happy people are more successful at work, have more satisfying relationships and better health status. Whilst most universities seek to develop the positive attributes of graduates (to equip them for life in a changing modern world), many traditional tertiary education practices are at odds with contemporary models of

education and evidence emerging from the scientific study of well-being. With the increased internationalization of research and education, the tertiary context is becoming even more complex and cross-cultural considerations are becoming an increasingly important aspect of campus life.

Well-being practices

Well-being has been conceptualized in several ways, with definitions identifying an array of different facets, including emotional, subjective, psychological and social dimensions (e.g. Keyes, 2007; Rath & Harter, 2010; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Given that there is emerging evidence of the components of well-being, such as positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA; Seligman, 2011), it is possible to propose an initial framework for the cultivation of well-being within the university context (Table 1).

While the 'business' of universities (i.e. the production and dissemination of knowledge) is somewhat unique among organizations, their structure, cultural dynamics and basic operation make them somewhat similar to other more commercially focused organizations. As such, the organizational change and development literatures are as relevant to a university as they are to a retail bank or a transportation company. One positive organizational change and development approach reported extensively in that literature that has particular relevance to the present discussion is the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1999). AI, consistent with the philosophy of positive psychology and positive education, is encompassed by the 4-D Model (i.e. Discovery, Dream, Design and Delivery). This model is one useful starting point for any university considering the integration and application of positive psychology or positive education.

As with most organizational change, the movement towards positive education at the tertiary level would require strong, committed leadership. Most especially, this would involve some modelling of the principles underpinning the approach, including a clear direction and vision, authentic relationships, open communication and an array of other behaviours that would help to cultivate a climate of positivity across a university. In so doing, a university is more likely to become 'positively deviant', or act in ways that substantially deviate from what is typically done to improve human experience within tertiary institutions (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2006). Should a university become a truly positive institution, the people associated with it are likely to become more engaged, make greater use of

Table 1. Well-being activities across five key contexts within universities.

	Classroom	Social	Local community	Faculty/administration	Residential
Positive emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum development using PP constructs (e.g. gratitude) Positive mood inductions (e.g. using humour at start of classes, music) Creativity exercises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengths-focused social events Savoring activities in groups Aspirational dinners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Movie screenings with positive psychological content (e.g. 'Happy') Voluntary work activities integrated into course work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate PP principles into team development activities Run information sessions to teach staff about positivity ratios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement 'strengths spotting' amongst residents Make available cross-cultural educational material on sources of well-being
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach students about flow and what promotes it Encourage exercises that cultivate flow Commence classes with simple mindfulness training exercises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support flow-inducing social groups (e.g. dance classes, chess or book clubs) Mindfulness meditation groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sponsor flow-inducing community groups (e.g. community gardens) Run free seminars and talks on the importance of flow and absorption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize and reward workplace initiatives designed to enhance flow and engagement Recommend practices for making meetings, seminars more engaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residential events for increasing flow (e.g. African drumming) PP information nights
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design strengths-based group assignments Encourage study groups based on PP principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement programmes that encourage random acts of kindness Positive mood inductions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer parenting workshops on active constructive responding Sponsor family days to enhance connectivity (e.g. picnic days) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize and reward work output at the team level (as opposed to the individual level) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrate national holidays to promote cross-cultural learning Hold cultural awareness sessions Display flags, maps, emblems of different nations
Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop curriculum that allows students to connect with strengths and values Get students to contribute ideas for curriculum Use student suggestions in curriculum development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess levels of Social Capital Develop social values from 'bottom-up' Invite cross-campus input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the notion of the university as a virtuous organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage job crafting to help staff develop congruent career paths Build more flexibility and choice into job descriptions Tap more into intrinsic motivation of staff (e.g. team innovation day) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable residents to tangibly express the values of the residence
Accomplishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement assessments for learning, as well as assessments of learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge individuals who positively contribute to campus life (i.e. 'positive energizers') 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give awards for outstanding contributions to community life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Infuse performance appraisal systems with PP approaches (e.g. AI) Train people leaders (academics and general staff) in PP principles and coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer evidence-based coaching to enhance academic performance Residential goal setting in relation to enhancing life on campus University recognition of achievements made by residents in enhancing well-being of themselves and others

their strengths, experience more positive emotion and, just as importantly, achieve higher levels of academic success (Huebner, Gilman, Reshley, & Hall, 2009).

Table 1 proposes a framework for building Positive Universities based on the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). Five key aspects of university life are considered: (1) classroom and formal learning environments, (2) social environments, (3) local community, (4) faculty and administrative work environments and (5) residential environments. We have chosen these contexts to ensure that our recommendations are contextualized and tangible. It should be noted that the scope of this endeavour makes it difficult to rely on randomized controlled trials to validate the approach. However, enough support can be garnered from the education, positive psychology, management and positive organizational scholarship literatures to advance this as a good initial framework for the proposed endeavour.

Positive education in formal teaching environments

Formal teaching environments within the tertiary sector have significantly changed in the past 20 years. Key drivers of change include the increased internationalization of the tertiary sector, increased use of information and communication technology and competitiveness regarding teaching quality demanded by the 'student consumer'. Whilst Positive Education is on the rise in secondary schools (Seligman et al., 2009), it appears to be less present in the tertiary system. If the Australian experience is representative of global trends, then positive psychology has yet to be integrated into 'mainstream' psychology, with courses offered largely as 'special topics' at the postgraduate level.

Whilst explicit, specific activities related to positive psychology can be taught and embedded within curriculum, McGrath and Noble (2010) point out that positive teacher–student or lecturer–student relationships can contribute significantly to students' well-being, pro-social behaviours and learning outcomes. They also suggest increasing intrinsic motivation by simply having fun with students (e.g. through the use of humour or games) and by providing students with some opportunity for autonomy and choice in assignments and discussions about the way they would like their learning environment to be created.

Table 1 presents a range of simple examples of suggested activities that could be implemented in formal teaching environments that are consistent with the ethos of positive education. For brevity, only a selection of these examples is discussed in more detail.

Cultivation of positive emotion

Increases in well-being are likely to produce increases in learning because positive mood produces broader attention (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Rowe et al., 2007), more creative thinking (Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1994; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987) and more holistic thinking (Isen, Niedenthal, & Cantor, 1992). In contrast, negative mood narrows the focus of attention (Bolte, Goschke, & Kuhl, 2003) and leads to more critical and analytical thinking (Kuhl, 2000). Whilst both are important, educational institutions heavily emphasize critical (rather than creative) thinking, and the negative mood often associated with formal education settings (e.g. lecture theatres) would seem to create an imbalance towards critical thinking. There are a myriad ways to induce positive mood within these settings, including beginning lectures or tutorials with relevant musical content, using film or interesting literature to bring material 'to life', and/or through the use of humour and actively encouraging it.

Mindfulness practices

One option for enhancing the quality of student and staff experience across a university is via the use of exercises or the provision of facilities that support the cultivation of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be enhanced in many ways and practiced whilst engaged in a wide variety of personal and professional activities (for examples see Nakai & Schultz, 2000) either inside or outside formal teaching environments. Potential opportunities for developing mindfulness might include beginning lectures or tutorials with short awareness exercises (e.g. body scans, focused breathing) or providing individuals with dedicated spaces to practice more structured, formal forms of practice (e.g. 'quiet' rooms for meditation practice). Encouragingly, the philosophy, principles and practices of mindfulness are beginning to inform curriculum development at both tertiary and secondary levels. For example, in a secondary school intervention students reported reduced negative affect, greater emotional awareness and emotional regulation, along with increased feelings of calmness, relaxation and self-acceptance compared to controls (Broderick & Metz, 2009). In addition, mindfulness has been successfully incorporated into the formal training of medical students and led to a range of positive outcomes (for an example of such a programme, see Hassed, de Lisle, Sullivan, & Pier, 2008).

Strengths use in group assignments

Linley and Harrington (2006) suggest that knowing and using strengths can have a positive effect on

teamwork and team outcomes. Group work assignments are often set in tertiary education based on the premise that students must learn to work together, with people from diverse backgrounds. One way to help ‘scaffold’ students for these tasks is to use strengths assessments such as the VIA (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) or Realise2 (CAPP, 2010) and to help students understand which strengths might be most usefully employed during group work.

Positive education and social environments

University campuses are enormously social places where very diverse groups of people come together and interact in a variety of settings (e.g. sports venues, bars, religious associations, academic clubs, bookshops). As such, there are numerous opportunities for the formation of enriching, supportive relationships, which McGrath and Noble (2010) argue can enhance educational culture (e.g. greater pro-social behaviour), student experience (e.g. increased intrinsic motivation) and lead to better academic outcomes. Given the highly social nature of university life and the strong relationship that exists between social support and well-being (Haidt, 2006; Seligman, 2002), universities seem to be ideal settings for the systematic promotion of positive relationships and generation of ‘social capital’.

According to Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006), social capital refers to collective resources (including civic participation, norms of reciprocity, community-focused organizations, etc.) that enhance community capacity to create structures of cohesion, support and trust. In organizational contexts, social capital is positive if it supports people to attain higher order goals that represent growth and flourishing at the individual, group and organizational level (Baker & Dutton, 2007). For example, group dynamics research suggests that interpersonal acts of generosity, kindness and other forms of positivity can create expansive emotional spaces that enhance collective effort (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

Table 1 presents examples of campus-based activities that are consistent with the positive education ethos of increasing and teaching well-being. Some of these activities will now be discussed in more detail.

Strategies for enhancing kindness

Introducing a campus-wide kindness strategy has the potential to enhance social relationships and emotional experience. Whilst the literatures dedicated to understanding kindness and related concepts (e.g. generalized reciprocity) have yielded surprisingly few targeted interventions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the

importance of kindness within university contexts has recently been recognized (Clegg & Rowland, 2010). According to Clegg and Rowland (2010), it is not ‘out of place’ to talk about kindness in higher education because the cognitive components of intellectual development are no less important than the embodied and experiential components. As such, there is an argument to be made for encouraging students and staff to look for opportunities to engage in acts of kindness or generalized reciprocity (i.e. ‘paying it forward’). Buchanan and Bardi (2010) conducted an experiment designed to establish the effects of acts of kindness on life satisfaction. Participants aged 18–60 took part on a voluntary basis. They were randomly assigned to perform either acts of kindness, acts of novelty, or no acts on a daily basis for 10 days. Their life satisfaction was measured before and after the 10-day experiment. As expected, performing acts of kindness resulted in an increase in life satisfaction. It should be noted, however, that attempts to prescribe or regulate kindness are likely to diminish the impact of such acts (by making them routinized). As such, the implementation of a kindness strategy may be best addressed at the organizational level, through the adoption of values and agreed practices that increase the probability of kindness towards other people (Clegg & Rowland, 2010).

Flow-inducing social groups

Flow is prototypical of the Engaged Life and has been described as a subjective state associated with total absorption in an activity, a loss of reflective self-consciousness, temporal distortion (i.e. the subjective sense of time ‘stopping’) and the emerging of action and awareness (i.e. being at ‘one’ with the activity; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Importantly, flow has been associated with heightened feelings of subjective well-being (e.g. competence, satisfaction, enjoyment). Given flow research indicates that certain pre-conditions are needed for flow to occur (i.e. equilibrium between skill and challenge, short-term goals, availability immediate feedback, task choice), the theory provides practical guidance for those interested in enhancing the quality of students and staff in educational contexts. This makes the identification of ‘flow-based activities’ both appropriate and practical, and may involve utilising flow principles to enliven existing group activities (e.g. class debates) or to inform the introduction of novel group based activities (e.g. on-campus dance classes). Furthermore, the theory and its principles can also be used by teachers to help students take a different perspective on their learning experience and acquire knowledge that may help them to change that experience for the better.

The practical challenges of implementing a positive social agenda across campus will be broad and often unanticipated. A key way to overcome resistance and maximize autonomy will be to provide broad frameworks into which campus participants, particularly students can add to and 'color in'. Involving student organizations in these programmes from the outset will be a key implementation issue.

Positive education in the local community

The original idea of a university was to not only to produce knowledge, but also to disseminate knowledge, and not only in the classroom. That is, a university is a social institution that can and should play a significant role in the local community. The notion of a virtuous organization is particularly relevant here (Cameron et al., 2006) and based on the definition of a virtuous organization, we would propose that to claim the status of a 'positive university', a university would need to show that it: (a) is morally good, (b) has human impact and (c) creates social betterment.

Research supports the growing interest in volunteering and the associated positive benefits for those who engage in it. For example, the 'Do Good Live Well Survey' (see the report at <http://www.dogoodlivewell.org>, Do Good Live Will Survey, 2010) of 4582 adults (over 18 years of age) found that 41% of residents of the USA engaged in unpaid service activities (not including giving money or donations), with a quarter doing so through workplace sponsored community events. Of those who did volunteer, 68% reported that this activity has made them feel physically healthier.

A further example of a well-being initiative in the community is the Good Mood Safari (2009; see <http://www.goodmoodsafari.com.au>) in which the University of Wollongong and Life Line South Coast, NSW, developed a positive psychology outdoor tourist experience, which involves positive psychology experiential learning in major tourist destinations of the region. This clearly located well-being initiatives in the local community.

Faculty and administration work environments

Across universities, the focus of faculty staff may vary significantly. For instance, for some academics, the primary focus will be research, whilst for others it might be teaching, academic governance, administrative roles or some blend of these. Similarly, the roles of administrative or non-academic staff can vary greatly and range from running the university recreation and sports facilities to overseeing major capital budgets or

even dealing with the unique needs of international students. Within this context, a positive university would be proactive and responsive to its workforce, which brings the notion of a resilient organization into focus. Sutcliffe and Vogus (2006) state that the literatures that address organizational resilience are those that examine organizational learning and adaptation, dynamic capabilities and high reliability organizing. A resilient organization will flexibly rearrange or transfer knowledge and resources to deal with situations as they arise. Hence, a positive university will not only address academic and well-being issues, but the resilience of the organization as a whole. Given that universities are based on long held traditions, there may be more effort required to transform organizational cultures to those that are well-being based, unlike startup organizations well known for well-being initiatives such as Google and Zappos.

Table 1 summarizes a range of suggested activities that could be implemented in university workforces consistent with positive education principles. A notable inclusion is evidence-based coaching for the enhancement of academic performance and professional functioning more generally. The field of coaching has advanced considerably in the past decade (for a review, see Grant & Cavanagh, 2011) and recent studies indicate that evidence-based coaching is an effective means of supporting professional development within educational settings (e.g. Grant, Green, & Rynsaardt, 2010; Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007). The inclusion of evidence-based coaching in this framework is highly appropriate as it is increasingly considered a form of applied positive psychology (Grant & Cavanagh, 2011).

Positive education and the residential environments

Residential environments have been included within this article due to the central place they occupy in many students' experience of university life. Many of the world's best universities have residential facilities as central to their operations. Indeed within the Australian context, the number of residential beds aligns closely with the ranking of the quality of the university. In many ways, the original residential college drawn from Oxford and Cambridge traditions captures the essence of the university idea. Emphases of excellence, strengths and, virtue abound in these contexts, to develop individuals with meaning and purpose. With financial challenges on universities, these ideals may have been significantly diluted to cost effective student housing with few if any of the value add of the peer support and social inclusion of the residential environment. In our view, a positive university will include great emphasis on residential environments because of their ability to impact the

whole student, and link alumni to the university in a life-long fashion.

Table 1 illustrates a range of suggested activities that could be implemented in residential environments that are consistent with the positive education philosophy of increasing and teaching well-being. For some residences, this will be a formalization of what already exists. For other residences, significant cultural change will be required to remove undesirable practices (e.g. the over use of alcohol) and support adjustment to the increased global student mobility diversifying the cultures represented within residence.

Implement strengths spotting amongst residents living in University housing

Through the use of strengths assessment and a strengths-discussion within the residential environment, students can be taught to cultivate the skill of identifying other residents' strengths in action. Creating social opportunities to share and complementary partner around strengths will also assist students to develop 'strengths-colored glasses' (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006, p. 73). This also helps to foster tolerance and an appreciation for difference, together with creating a sense of camaraderie, collaboration, teamwork and a powerful sense of relatedness and belonging.

The practical implementation of these ideas will not be without its significant challenges. Many residential environments within universities are traditional and are overseen by Boards of Directors. Dealing with these board members and explaining to them the benefits of positive education will be paramount. 'Pastoral care' is a well-known term, and in many ways positive education brings the scientific evidence base and structure to this long tradition. The creation of a positive university and the associated implementation of positive practices as outlined in this article will ultimately depend on the level of commitment by the leadership team.

A new example of a positive residence is at the University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia, where they are currently building and planning a university residence of 550 residents that is to be based entirely on positive organizational and positive educational principles. This residence (sometimes referred to as college or dormitory) is to have flourishing as its key purpose, and will include implicit and explicit education in well-being evidence. Moreover, residents will receive a *comprehensive student fitness* evaluation (examining physical and mental fitness) and also residents will receive personal flourishing coaching, which will include strengths coaching based on the *Realise2* (CAPP, 2010). The use of positive computing

technologies will also be implemented, and medical students will be paired with all international students as personal health mentors. The unit will include explicit use of positive leadership principles as described by Cameron (2008). Residential programming will be designed by residents within the parameters of Seligman's Well-being Theory, i.e. PERMA. Student well-being, student retention, graduate outcomes and academic performance will be benchmarked against other university students living in residence and not living in residence.

Conclusion

A sample of positive education-based evidence has been applied to key contexts of a university, using pleasure, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment as a core organizing principle. The purpose has been to start a conversation regarding the concept of a positive university, together with expanding the concept of positive education. Different universities may select different contexts and different positive education evidence and practices to draw from. Research into positive education needs to extend to tertiary education, and not just in the formal teaching environment but include the whole organization.

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