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Thriving, not just surviving: Using positive psychology to build psychological wellbeing in pre-tertiary students

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Abstract

The significance of psychological wellbeing for student success is under-investigated, particularly for pre-tertiary Enabling students (those traditionally under-represented in higher education). Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) have proven effective in enhancing wellbeing but are rarely integrated into university courses. This study explored a PPI, *Be Positive*, a 12-week program, designed to teach students strategies and techniques to help them re-frame their thinking about themselves and their academic pursuits. The program was evaluated with 37 Enabling students who completed weekly wellbeing questionnaires alongside self-reports about their study-related wellbeing. Results indicated fluctuating but generally positive levels of wellbeing throughout the program, with the highest levels recorded in the final weeks. A significant number of participants (79%) reported positive wellbeing by the program end, contrasting typical declines in student wellbeing during university terms. Thematic analysis of student reflections on how the program supported their wellbeing identified four key areas: affective balance, adaptive psychological resources, self-regulation, and positive implications for both academic and personal life. The findings suggest that PPIs like *Be Positive* can offer a proactive approach to mental health, equipping students with tools for resilience and emotional regulation, thereby enhancing wellbeing and potentially subsequent academic performance.

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Introduction

The benefit of psychological wellness is an often-overlooked construct in research, especially in relation to student success at university. This is evident with research output on depression and anxiety significantly exceeding the research output on subjective wellbeing (James & Walters, 2020). Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) have been shown to play a significant role in improving a person's psychosocial positionality and emotional wellbeing but remain an often-overlooked tool in best teaching practice (Phan et al., 2018). Schreiner (2010) argues that universities should change from a failure prevention model to a success promotion model, using programs such as PPIs to assist students to thrive in academic learning environments. Slykerman and Mitchell (2021) claim that psychological wellbeing in new university students decreases significantly during their first year of enrolment. Therefore, a PPI designed explicitly for building students' psychological wellbeing and encouraging a more optimistic mindset towards their study is a unique opportunity for universities. Research by James and Walters (2020) with students enrolled in an Australian Pre-tertiary Enabling program (i.e., a course designed to prepare students for entry into an undergraduate degree) suggests that introducing Positive Psychology strategies not only improved students' wellbeing but led to positive changes in their personal lives as well. This paper presents the findings of a further positive psychology initiative that was piloted with Australian Enabling students. The purpose of this initiative was to use an innovative approach to teach students proven strategies that would allow them to re-frame their thinking processes and bring a more optimistic mindset to their studies whilst also improving their wellbeing. Over the course of the initiative, study participants were asked to report regularly on both their ongoing wellbeing and their understanding of the strategies they were learning and the impact they could have.

Literature

Enabling students' characteristics

Starting university can be a daunting prospect for many students and the challenges they encounter during the transition can have a detrimental impact on students' wellbeing and mental health (Morgan et al., 2023). James et al. (2023) explain that this experience can be particularly anxiety-inducing for Enabling students as they transition through what Willans (2010) describes as a borderland, a disorientating space between university and their past experiences. Reasons for the elevated psychological distress which Enabling students experience are manifold, and attributable to both academic and non-academic challenges. Firstly, students in Enabling programs may encounter more significant academic hurdles due to the disadvantages they may have experienced in their previous educational journeys (Crawford et al., 2016). Consequently, they may start university with lower levels of academic capital, including underdeveloped critical thinking skills. This can potentially undermine their confidence in their academic capabilities which

in turn may adversely affect their overall wellbeing (James et al., 2023). Enabling students may also be subject to additional external stressors. They often come from 'non-traditional' groups which can include: first in family, low socio-economic status and mature age (Crawford et al., 2016). As a result, they may experience worry connected to financial constraints, a lack of support, balancing study with family responsibilities (Nieuwoudt, 2021) and feel like they may not fit-in at university (Habel et al., 2016). Their psychological wellbeing can also be compromised by physical and mental health issues (Taylor et al., 2020). Nieuwoudt's (2021) study concluded that Enabling students experience higher levels of psychological distress than Australian undergraduate students. Moreover, she found there was no significant difference in psychological distress between female and male students which contrasts to previous studies that suggest females experience higher levels of psychological distress than males. These findings suggest that in general, Enabling students enter these programs with higher levels of psychological distress than their undergraduate cohorts.

State of Wellbeing

Wellbeing encompasses "general health, happiness, and contentment with life" (Henning et al., 2023, p. 60). The state of wellbeing is highly valued in education because of the benefits that it brings to students' academic performance and graduate capabilities. Firstly, wellbeing generates a sense of hope and increases self-efficacy which helps students to cope with the demands of education (Young et al., 2022). Alongside these benefits, Tokuhama-Espinosa (2011) explains that educational neuroscience shows that wellbeing positively impacts cognitive functions, memory retention, and concentration. This interconnectedness helps unlock the brain's potential for more efficient functioning. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) contend that emotionally stable students carry less burdens, are less overwhelmed and are consequently better able to utilise components of their brain that are "recruited most heavily in education" (p. 7).

Positive wellbeing also impacts favourably on students' learning performance and engagement levels, whereas negative wellbeing has an adverse impact across these same dimensions (Zhoc et al., 2022). Kahu (2013) illustrate this relationship by showing how negative attitudes such as frustration and anxiety can provoke unhelpful behaviours, such as reduced motivation. This can contribute to students feeling a sense of disconnect. Cultivating wellbeing in an educational context is, therefore, increasingly advocated at universities as it serves as the foundation from which students can devote the additional psychological resources needed to engage in complex learning activities, absorb information, and perform academic tasks effectively (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2011; Young et al., 2022). This foundation can support and sustain optimal functioning for students and provide a solid base to navigate and excel in their academic endeavours (Norwich et al., 2022). As Enabling students typically present with wellbeing issues, it is essential that their wellbeing is fostered to improve their chances of academic success.

Positive Affect

Positive affect forms the foundation for higher levels of psychological wellbeing (Henning et al., 2023; Lambert et al., 2019). It is interwoven with improved learning as it unlocks more effective functioning response pathways in the brain and can lead to improved overall wellbeing as it acts as a catalyst for students to achieve their educational goals. Waters et al. (2022) highlight the

power of positive affect and reappraisal in relation to stress management. They found that when individuals were able to maintain positive affect, they experienced a stronger sense of psychological wellbeing through times of stress. Positive affect further supports a student's capacity to reason and explains the decision-making process and mechanisms behind how individuals respond to various situations in life (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Neurochemically, feeling a positive affect activates the dopaminergic system in brain areas which improve students' executive control and flexible thinking (Erez & Isen, 2002). Students in a positive emotional state are more adept at absorbing and assimilating new information, which leads to more efficient learning and retention of knowledge. People are also more inclined to see potential solutions to challenges when physiology is optimised (Fredrickson, 2013). Finally, James and Walters (2020) suggest that positive affect produces pro-social behaviours which generate more positive interactions and positive emotions.

Positive Emotions

While positive affect encompasses a broader range of overall positive feelings and mood states, positive emotions relate to specific feelings people experience. They are both crucial components in fostering thriving and overall psychological wellbeing. Positive emotions serve as markers of flourishing, reflecting a deeper dimension of overall wellbeing (Laakso et al., 2023). Fredrickson's (2001) research found that "positive emotions serve as markers of flourishing, or optimal well-being" (p. 1) and that when students are experiencing these more positive emotions, they are "not plagued by negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness and anger" (p. 1). Fredrickson (2001) advocates for the cultivation of positive emotions to empower students to achieve psychological growth and improved wellbeing. Positive psychology focuses specifically on this, aiming to understand and cultivate positive emotions that contribute to wellbeing and a state of flourishing. James and Walters (2020) found that redirecting Enabling students' neuropathways to think in a more positive manner assisted in developing a more optimistic mindset towards their studies and towards themselves and their capacity to study. This optimistic mindset can be connected to the notion of thriving, which includes academic thriving, intrapersonal thriving and interpersonal thriving (Schreiner, 2010). Research suggests, therefore, that fostering positive emotions and a thriving mindset can play an important role in enhancing overall wellbeing and academic success.

Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs)

Positive psychological interventions (PPIs) are activities with a practical application, such as mindfulness, which are created to strengthen an individual's positive resources (Duan et al., 2022). In a systematic literature review, Bolier et al. (2013) found that the majority of positive psychology-based interventions significantly enhanced participants' subjective and psychological wellbeing. However, the studies in this review tended to focus on single interventions, such as gratitude, strengths, acts of kindness, resilience and optimism, and did not combine multiple strategies. Platt et al. (2020) suggested that multi-component PPIs would be better as they "improve person-activity fit" (p.7), which increases engagement and outcomes. Studies also tend to focus more on the impacts of PPIs on primary and high school students. Hobbs et al. (2022) addressed this gap through a systematic review of 27 studies which investigated university students' responses to PPIs. All of these studies reported on quantitative data and most used

validated measures incorporating two different ways of measuring Therefore, a PPI designed explicitly for building students' psychological wellbeing and encouraging wellbeing. 85% of the studies reported at least one positive effect, and 40% consistently showed positive results across all psychological wellbeing metrics used. These findings led the authors to tentatively conclude that positive psychology courses, within university degree programs, are useful tools to facilitate psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction and happiness. This review was, however, limited as it only reviewed quantitative measures of wellbeing. Hobbs et al. (2022) acknowledge this limitation and suggest that a qualitative approach could reveal a greater understanding of the students' experiences of the interventions.

Nieuwoudt (2021) explored the consequences of psychological distress on Enabling students, citing a decreased ability to effectively engage in study, which adversely affects academic performance, and suggested that resources to support the psychological wellbeing of Enabling students are much needed. Despite this need, there is a dearth of studies investigating the impact of PPI interventions in Enabling programs. In one of the few studies undertaken, Walters and James (2020) investigated the impacts of a positive psychology unit of study in an Enabling program. This qualitative study investigated 82 students' evaluations to positive psychology strategies taught within a unit of study. Findings revealed the potential value of PPI interventions for Enabling students as participants reported increased optimism, resilience and hope. They argue that these students are wanting change and want to find a way to be more optimistic and look for the positives in life. They are looking for a way to break the mould of the victim paradigm that past experiences and life in general has implied (Walters & James, 2020, p. 184).

The students in this study appreciated the shifts they observed in their personal mindsets and acknowledged that these changes were a result of applying positive psychology strategies, which countered negative thought patterns and fostered a more optimistic perspective.

The Be Positive Program

The Be Positive program was developed to address these research gaps by introducing a prevention-oriented, multi-component, online asynchronous PPI into an Enabling program in a higher education setting. This initiative was designed to teach students strategies to re-frame their mindset and self-beliefs, empowering them to employ more positive strategies in overcoming self-defeating beliefs. Be Positive is an optional 12-week program which students from one unit of study were invited to complete as an add-on to their existing course. Activities within the program are self-paced and completed independently through self-directed actions.

Be Positive introduces students to 10 positive psychology concepts (see Table 1) and uses animated videos to explore a range of positive psychology concepts. The videos used animated characters in real world settings to explain the positive psychology concepts through storylines, dialogue and voiceover. This approach was chosen as it is an effective pedagogical tool to explain new and complex concepts while engaging students and enhancing their learning experience (Liu & Elms, 2019). The first video in Week 1 introduced the animated characters and the positive psychology concepts explored during the program. During weeks 2-11, each uniquely designed animated character presented that week's positive psychology concept in an engaging manner. In Week 12, the characters summarised the weekly positive psychology concepts.

Each weekly video was aligned to a corresponding 'Information Sheet' which summarised the positive psychology concept and included an overview called 'In a Nutshell'. These information sheets also included interactive activities for the students to complete. The activities were designed to deepen students' understanding of the concept and the learning materials encouraged them to apply the strategies to their own situations. The program was designed to have both an immediate and future impact on the participants' wellbeing as they accessed strategies which could help them reframe their mindset regarding study and their ability as learners. The content and underpinning theory behind the program are presented in Table 1.

Figure 1

Be Positive animated characters

Methodology

Case study design was chosen because it suited the context of our pilot program, which took place in a single school within a single university over a specific, defined time period. Moreover, this design enabled us to fully explore the new initiative, which is a strength of the case study approach as detailed analysis can describe and explain new and previously unrecognised patterns, phenomena or traits, whilst also contextualising understanding of the perceived value of new programs (Rozsahegyi, 2019). Case studies also offer possibilities rather than certainties (Bassey, 1999). This rationale underpinned our expectations around the Be Positive pilot study as we did not anticipate definitive answers; rather, we wanted the culmination of the individual responses within the pilot program to provide a snapshot or starting point to understanding participant wellbeing, whilst then illuminating ways in which the Be Positive initiative impacted enabling students' current and future wellbeing. As case studies can also reveal outlying features, or those that may deviate from the norm (Rozsahegyi, 2019), we were also interested to see whether the Enabling students' responses to the positive psychology intervention and the impacts it had on their wellbeing differed from those in the extant literature on undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Utilising the approach advocated by Rozsahegyi (2019), both structured and unstructured questions were integrated into the data collection. This combined method of data gathering enhances case study design as the combined strengths of both sets of data enable a greater understanding of the research questions (Creswell, 2015). Ultimately, the case study approach provided rich, contextually grounded insights into the initiative's impact on students' psychological wellbeing. These insights, grounded in the voices and experiences of students themselves, hold the potential to inform future iterations of the initiative and contribute to the broader discourse on strategies to support equity students in higher education.

Table 1

The Be Positive program: Weekly content and description

Week	Content	Description: Theories, Concepts and Strategies
1	Introduction	Outline the Be Positive program and the positive psychology strategies in the program.
2	Growth Mindset theory	Encourage students to experiment with new techniques and approaches to challenges to promote more positive thinking and improve outcomes.
3	Learned Helplessness and the 4 Cs	Overcome past conditioning and reduce negative self-talk to create a more positive and proactive attitude.
4	Optimistic Thinking	Develop optimistic thinking by reframing situations as temporary, impersonal, and specific.
5	ANTS and Planting Optimistic Thoughts (POTS)	Recognise automatic negative thoughts (ANTS) and replace them with positive thoughts that are more realistic, helpful, and solution orientated.
6	ABCDE	Assist with responding to adverse situations by identifying beliefs and consequences connected to that situation before disputing the irrational and negative aspects of these to facilitate better energy and more positive thinking about the event.
7	Broaden and Build	Develop broader awareness and perspectives to calm the brain and react to situations using a more positive lens.
8	Stress	Better manage stress through an understanding of the stress cycle and positive thinking tools.
9	Strengths and Virtues	Identify and use core values and character strengths to experience more purpose and meaning in life.
10	Iceberg Theory	Identify trigger points to better understand and modify behaviour, forming more positive intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.
11	Gratitude and Pay It Forward	Apply an attitude of gratitude and pay it forward to develop a more positive mindset and increase wellbeing.
12	Conclusion	Summarise the 10 positive psychology theories to empower students to enjoy the 'ups' in life and cope better with the 'downs' so that they thrive, not just survive in their studies and in life.

Research Aims

The research aims were twofold: firstly, to investigate the subjective wellbeing of Enabling students involved in the Be Positive intervention, and secondly, to evaluate the students' perceptions of how they believed the program influenced their wellbeing during the program and how they believed it could impact their future wellbeing. Based on this aim, the following research questions were formulated:

Research Question 1a (RQ1a). What were Enabling students' perceptions of their general psychological wellbeing throughout the Be Positive program?

Research Question 1b (RQ1b). What were Enabling students' perceptions of their psychological wellbeing in relation to their studies throughout the Be Positive program?

Research Question 2 (RQ2). In what ways did the Enabling students believe the program contributed to their psychological wellbeing, both during the program and in terms of their future wellbeing?

Method

Ethical clearance for this project was given by the Human Research Ethics Committee at CQUniversity (Ethical clearance 0000023150). The program was piloted over Term 1 (March - June) and Term 2 (July - October) 2022. Students who were enrolled in an Enabling program course at CQUniversity, a multi- campus regional university in Australia, were invited to participate via email.

Participants

Out of a total of 511 initial enrolments in the course across the two terms, 37 students agreed to participate. Given the high level of engagement required for this activity, the research team was satisfied with a 7% participation rate. However, student participation in the program declined throughout the two terms. In weeks 1- 12 the numbers were as follows: 37,36, 28, 21, 20, 21, 17, 19, 16, 17, 16, 15. As this project was anonymous in nature, the research team were unable to reach out to the students to find out the reasons for this decline. This trend mirrors attrition rates observed during the term in the Enabling program. However, it is also possible that the decline could have been influenced by changes in students' participation i.e. students involved in the early weeks of the program did not complete the questionnaires as the program progressed.

Demographics

The highest percentage of students were between 25-34 years old (30%), with similar numbers of students aged between 18-24 years old (22%) and 35-44 years old (24%), closely followed by those in the 45-54(19%) age range. One student was 55-64 years old (2.5 %), and one student was 65 (2.5 %). All students were domestic students defined as those with Australian Citizenship or Permanent Residency. Gender information was not recorded. The research team also sought to explore the educational backgrounds of the students and ascertain their highest level of education attained. Most students had completed Year 11 or below (32%), closely followed by students with Year 12 certificates (30%). Only two students had completed a Higher Education qualification; one student had a bachelor's degree and one had a graduate diploma.

Measures

The World Health Organisation's Wellbeing Index (WHO-5) was used to determine Enabling students' perceptions of their general wellbeing throughout the Be Positive program. This questionnaire is commonly employed for assessing wellbeing in non-patient populations (Sischka et al., 2020). It is valid when measuring subjective wellbeing (Topp et al., 2015) and is easy for students to complete and for researchers to score and interpret (Downs et al., 2017). The WHO-5 scale consists of five positively worded statements (e.g., "I have felt cheerful and in good spirits') and measures wellbeing over a period of time. The Be Positive students were asked to rate how closely each statement applied to their feelings during the previous four weeks by scoring each of the 5 statements from 5 (all of the time) to 0 (none of the time). Participants were asked to complete the WHO-5 questionnaire in weeks 1, 4, 8 and 12; it measured the students' perceptions of their wellbeing for the time periods: 3 weeks before term to Orientation ('O') Week, Week 1- Week 4, Week 5- Week 8 and Week 9- Week 12 respectively.

Analysis of data from the WHO-5 followed a 3-step approach. Firstly, we followed the method validated by Topp (2015) and transformed the raw data for each student into a percentage by calculating the 5 items from 0-25 and then multiplying by 4. 0% indicated the worst possible wellbeing and 100% represented the best possible wellbeing. Secondly, we re-grouped students' data according to wellbeing scores of ≤50% and_>50%. As WHO-5 scores of ≤50 indicate sub-optimal wellbeing, and scores of_>50 indicate positive wellbeing (Chongwo et al., 2018), this provided an indication of how many Be Positive students identified as having problematic wellbeing. Finally, to get a more nuanced picture of the students who identified as having sub-optimal wellbeing, we applied Topp's interpretation of Krieger et al. (2014). This allowed us to re-group the data so that: scores of 0 to ≤20 indicated major wellbeing issues; scores of 21 to ≤32 indicated moderate wellbeing issues; scores of 33 to ≤50 indicated minor wellbeing issues and scores of 51 to ≤100 indicated positive wellbeing. Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 indicated good internal consistency for the five-item questionnaire for the wellbeing measure.

A second structured question was included in each weekly questionnaire and used a self-anchoring scale adapted from conceptual labels in the Gallup-Healthways Life Evaluation Index (Gallup, 2022). This scale measured students' perspectives of their wellbeing at a particular moment in time by asking "How do you feel today?" in relation to their studies. Students answered by choosing one of 5 options: 1) Thriving: I am very excited and optimistic about studying; 2) Somewhat positive: I feel quite positive about studying; 3) Neutral: I am struggling a bit with the demands of study, but am generally going ok; 4) Struggling: I am struggling with my studies and worry about my studies; 5) Suffering: I am highly stressed and worry about studying a lot. The coding and the transformation were as follows: Suffering (1), Struggling (2), Neutral (3), Somewhat positive (4) and Thriving (5). Mean values were obtained from the transformed data to determine, on average, student perceptions of their wellbeing in relation to their studies.

To capture the impact on student wellbeing of the Be Positive program now and in the future, students completed the same open-ended question weekly. This question asked, "How will the information in the Be Positive program enhance your wellbeing as a student?" This was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach. Once the qualitative data were downloaded, the responses were reviewed to gain familiarity with the data.

Then the responses were coded, and descriptions written to inform the context behind the codes until finally themes were identified and correlated, before being written into findings.

Procedure

Students interested in participating in this project received an information sheet and a consent form. Once their consent forms were received, the students were enrolled in the program. Each week, they were sent an email introducing that week's positive psychology concept and providing a link to the corresponding animated video, information sheet and link to questionnaire. Students were asked to view the video, read the information sheet, and complete the interactive activities independently. Students were also asked to complete that week's questionnaire. Over the course of 12 consecutive weeks, participants were asked to complete a total of 12 weekly questionnaires.

Results and Discussion

RQ1a: What were Enabling students' perceptions of their general psychological wellbeing throughout the Be Positive program?

Results from the WHO-5 questionnaire are presented in Table 2 and show the percentage of students who reported major, moderate, minor and positive wellbeing scores over each 4-week period. Table 2 shows that for each four-week period, most students recorded a positive wellbeing score as indicated by the higher percentages (78.6%- 57.9%). Overall, students involved in the program were consistently positive across the term and were most positive at the end of the term (78.6% in weeks 9-12) as shown in Figure 2. This finding contradicted our expectations around the level of stress Enabling students experience during a term and also student wellbeing research which typically shows that psychological wellbeing in new university students decreases significantly between the beginning and end of a semester (Nieuwoudt, 2021; Slykerman & Mitchell, 2021). The results must, however, be treated with caution because of the small sample size in relation to the total student numbers on the course and the possibility that the sample was biased to those potentially with higher wellbeing.

In each 4-week period, some participants reported sub-optimal wellbeing. This percentage was highest in weeks 5-8 (42.1%), lowest in Weeks 9-12 (21.4%) and similar in the other time periods (38.1%- 37.8%). Of the students who reported sub-optimal wellbeing, only a small percentage considered themselves to be dealing with major wellbeing issues (5.4% - 4.8%), while a higher percentage deemed the issues to be moderate (15.8% -10.8%), and most considered them to be minor (33.3% - 21.4%). As most major issues were recorded at the beginning of the term, this finding is in line with previous research which shows that Enabling students tend to be more stressed at the start of the term as they navigate the uncertainty of a new course (James, 2024).

Overall, the WHO-5 revealed a fluctuation in student wellbeing levels, with a drop in positive wellbeing during weeks 5-9 before an increase at the end of the program. However, the fluctuations were not as marked as anticipated as most students sustained satisfactory or positive wellbeing over the course of the program.

Table 2

Percentages of wellbeing scores (major, moderate, minor wellbeing issues or positive wellbeing) for each 4-week period (O week indicates three weeks before term)

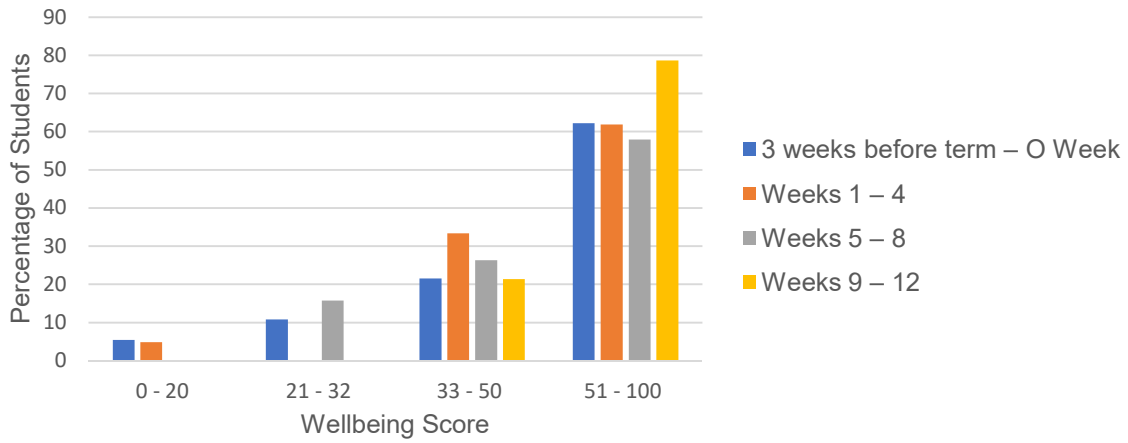
Period	Number and percent of students
Major wellbeing issues (0-20 score)	
O Week	2 (5.4%)
Weeks 1 – 4	1 (4.8%)
Weeks 5 – 8	0
Weeks 9 – 12	0
Moderate wellbeing issues (21-32 score)	
O Week	4 (10.8%)
Weeks 1 – 4	0
Weeks 5 – 8	3 (15.8%)
Weeks 9 – 12	0
Minor wellbeing issues (33-40 score)	
O week	8 (21.6%)
Weeks 1 – 4	7 (33.3%)
Weeks 5 – 8	5 (26.3%)
Weeks 9 – 12	3 (21.4%)
Positive wellbeing (51-100 score)	
O week	23 (62.2%)
Weeks 1 – 4	13 (61.9%)
Weeks 5 – 8	11 (57.9%)
Weeks 9 – 12	11 (78.6%)

RQ1b: What were Enabling students' perceptions of their psychological wellbeing in relation to their studies throughout the Be Positive program?

Results from the question regarding students' perceived wellbeing in relation to their studies on that particular day are shown in Table 3. The results from Table 3 (and also shown in Figure 3) indicate that the majority of students expressed positive attitudes towards their studies for the majority of the 12-week period. In seven out of the 12 weeks, students reported feeling more than 'somewhat positive' about their studies, with peak sentiments observed in Weeks 11, 12, and 10.

Figure 2

Wellbeing score before orientation week to Week 12



Additionally, for five out of the 12 weeks, students indicated feeling more than 'neutral' about their studies, suggesting minor struggles with the demands of study but overall satisfactory experiences. Concerns about their studies and wellbeing issues were notably highest at the beginning and middle of the term, which aligns with the findings from the WHO-5 questionnaire and typical stress patterns observed among Enabling students (James, 2024) and the impact of a difficult transition into university on Enabling students' wellbeing (Morgan et al., 2023). However, findings from this questionnaire showed that no student involved in the program identified as 'suffering' or 'struggling' in relation to their studies. This contrasts with the WHO-5 results, which showed that some students registered sub-optimal general wellbeing and suggests that the negative wellbeing experienced by students may not be attributable to study related concerns and could be more attributable to the multiple non-study related demands which Enabling students encounter.

Both questionnaires showed that the Be Positive participants generally exhibited satisfactory/positive wellbeing throughout the 12-week intervention. The general wellbeing and study-related daily wellbeing of participants in the Be Positive program was relatively good to begin with, stayed relatively good throughout the term, and peaked at the end. This pattern provides interesting contextualization for future analysis as it is not typical of wellbeing patterns exhibited in the extant literature. Most pertinently, the findings contrast with those reported by Nieuwoudt (2021), who published one of the few quantitative studies into the prevalence and severity of psychological distress among Enabling students.

Furthermore, fewer than half of the students in the Be Positive program recorded sub-optimal wellbeing (42.1%- 21.4%), whereas 95% of students in Nieuwoudt's study experienced above normal levels of distress (from a sample of 85/687 students invited to participate). Similarly, in Nieuwoudt's study, the percentage of students who recorded high or very high levels of anxiety, stress or depression were 80%, 59% and 48% respectively. In comparison, a maximum of 5.8% of students in the Be Positive program recorded major wellbeing issues and there were four weeks of the program in which no students registered major wellbeing issues. It is possible that student attrition in our study might account for the disparity in the wellbeing findings between Nieuwoudt's

study and ours. It could be surmised that the students with low wellbeing did not complete the program, leaving only the students with positive wellbeing completing the questionnaires, hence the high positive wellbeing average in the final weeks. This engagement with the questionnaires could be considered a limitation of this study but the marked difference does remain of note and offers interesting context for future research.

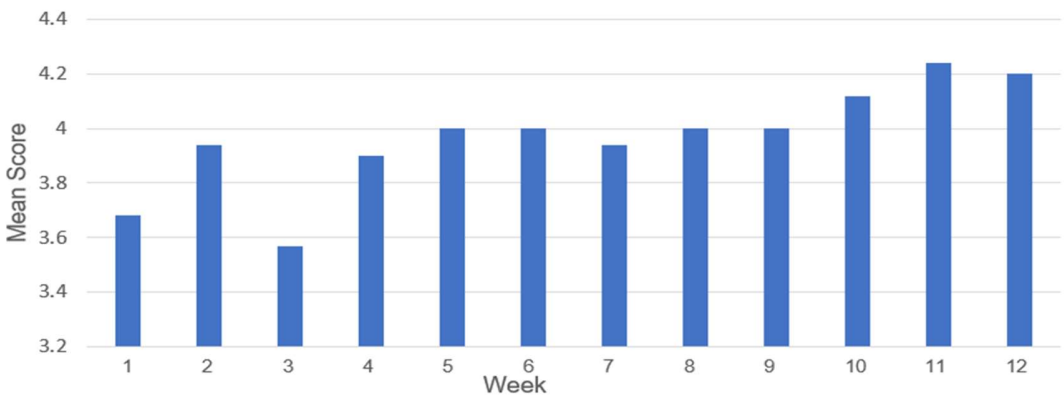
Table 3

Mean values and rank for statements connected to students' perceptions of their feelings towards study on that day for each week (struggling = 1 and thriving = 5)

Be Positive Lesson	Number of Students	Mean	Rank
Week 1	37	3.68	11
Week 2	36	3.94	8
Week 3	28	3.57	12
Week 4	21	3.90	10
Week 5	20	4.00	4
Week 6	21	4.00	4
Week 7	17	3.94	8
Week 8	19	4.00	4
Week 9	16	4.00	4
Week 10	17	4.12	3
Week 11	16	4.24	1
Week 12	15	4.20	2

Figure 3

Be Positive mean score from week 1 to week 12



RQ2: In what ways did the Enabling students believe the program contributed to their psychological wellbeing, both during the program and in terms of their future wellbeing?

Responses from students to this weekly question offer valuable insights into their perceptions of how applying the concepts learned in the Be Positive program could potentially improve the students' wellbeing, now and in the future. Analysis of this data revealed that the most frequently occurring responses related to the concepts of positivity and negativity and there were four overarching themes: "Affective Balance", "Adaptive psychological resources", "Fostering Self-Regulation" and "Implications for study and work". As seen in Table 4, these themes incorporate a variety of sub-themes, all of which relate to the students' experience with the Be Positive program. This juxtaposition of these themes with the students' perceived psychological wellbeing demonstrates the holistic impact that the Be Positive program had on the students' overall wellbeing.

Table 4

Themes from analysis

Theme	Be Positive Initiative
1: Affective Balance	Positive Cognitive Restructuring Cultivating a Positive Mindset Sustaining Optimistic Perspectives Decreasing Negative Affect
2: Adaptive Psychological Resources	Improved Adaptability Developing Resilience Copying with Stress
3: Fostering Self-Regulation	Emotional Regulation Kindness to Themselves and Others Help-Seeking Behaviours Optimal Functioning/Thriving
4: Implications	Implications for Study: Academic Efficacy Implications for Life: Social Connectedness

Theme 1: Affective Balance

Positive Cognitive Restructuring

Participants articulated a cognitive understanding of how the Be Positive lessons could empower them to change negative thinking into a more positive outlook. This appeared both in responses to the program as a whole and in relation to positive psychology strategies. For example, one student liked "the practical examples and demonstrations on how to turn negative thoughts and sayings into positive thoughts" and another articulated that "by using the ABCDE I can turn the negative thoughts to a positive thought so I can thrive as a student". Ackerman (2021) notes that a shift in perspective results in an improvement in wellbeing and quality of life, so the knowledge of how to change their thoughts could improve participants' wellbeing when applied to their studies and life now and in the future.

Cultivating a Positive Mindset

A comparable number of responses revealed that the program "was teaching [them] how to be more positive and think more positively" with some students stating that their thinking and mood had already been "enhanced", or "improved". As the literature argues that positive affect is the starting point for wellbeing and that positive emotions are "a proxy for wellbeing" (Lambert et al., 2019, p. 1142), the Be Positive participants' wellbeing could be impacted by the program's tools to increase positive emotions.

Sustaining Optimistic Perspectives

Many students also expressed a belief that the strategies from the program would enable them to sustain positive thinking. The concepts had become ingrained in the thinking of some students. One student stated that the concepts were "playing in the back of my mind to help me if I'm having a bad day". Other students made a pro-active commitment to re-engage with the program resources to support their studies and wellbeing when needed; for example, they stated: "I have added the ABCDE to my study board as a daily reminder" and "I will rewatch [the videos] to remind myself of all the points in each module delivered weekly to use in daily student life". This commitment to learning is integral to sustaining wellbeing improvements (Morgan et al., 2023) as it enables students to keep learning, through practicing and applying techniques which will support them. Having resources to navigate problematic situations could, therefore, contribute to student wellbeing levels.

Decreasing Negative Affect

Other students focused on decreasing negative affect rather than concentrating on increasing positive affect. Again, this applied to both the program as a whole: "I will be learning new strategies to help control unhealthy, negative thoughts", and individual strategies: "The Broaden and Build theory … will enhance my ability to recognise as a student when a thought is turning into a negative situation and stop it from happening". Laakso et al. (2020, p. 256) contend that negative emotions can inhibit "thought-action repertoires" and induce distress, whereas increasing positive emotions over negative emotions can optimise mental health. Students in the Be Positive program demonstrated an understanding of how to use strategies to better navigate negative emotions and this could contribute to wellbeing levels.

Theme 2: Adaptive Psychological Resources

Improved adaptability

Cobo-Rendon (2020) provides additional insight into the relationship between affective balance and wellbeing by explaining that individuals who experience a positive change in affective balance have greater access to psychological and interpersonal resources which in turn increases psychological wellbeing. Be Positive students recognised the significance of heightened positive affect and improved adaptability as a means to better navigate their past, present, and future circumstances. Firstly, the application of Be Positive concepts emerged as a transformative strategy, as they equipped students with better responses and more positive outcomes than the more survival-based responses they had used in the past. One student explained how: "When presented with a situation that triggers me, the Be Positive concepts help me thrive as a student as I have all the ideas in order to handle it better than in the past". Other Be Positive students

employed positive psychology strategies to alleviate distress as adverse situations arose. For instance, one student displayed increased resilience to a problematic study situation by applying the concept of YET stating, “Even today I had a difficult lecture and didn't understand the content...YET, I will keep on hitting the books until I do understand it”.

However, most responses were pre-emptive and connected to future scenarios with students expressing their intention to apply positive psychology concepts “when” or “if” they were faced with potential threats to their wellbeing. For example, one student described how: “this information will allow me to… replace ANTS thoughts with POTS thoughts. This will enhance my wellbeing as a student [as] I can ... change the situation I am in at that time and not allow the negative thoughts to stay around”. Students, therefore, perceived the Be Positive program to be a preventative approach to difficulties, as opposed to offering the traditional repair-focus found in psychological research (Donaldson et al., 2019). This pro-active approach to early intervention is crucial for emotional regulation and distress reduction because strategies which are introduced before emotions take hold are more effective than strategies applied once emotions have already gained control (Zhoc et al., 2022). This preventative approach can improve wellbeing by alleviating the distress which university students experience (Crawford et al., 2016), particularly when underpinned by wellbeing theory (Morgan et al., 2023).

Developing Resilience

Participants expressed an enhanced understanding of how the programs’ strategies could increase their resilience levels in difficult situations, noting how they would help them “push through”, and “keep trying” even when the “lessons are boring” or “the content and assignments are hard”. Students also noted that the program gave them the tools to respond to adversity more effectively than in the past with positive repercussions for their resilience. For example, one student explained that the program “will make me think twice when I feel like I am just failing like I did in school and give me that push to really keep going”. This ability to adapt and grow in response to adversity is integral to the development of psychological resilience, with the ability to bounce back key to wellbeing and academic success (Chung et al., 2017).

Coping with Stress

Stress is highlighted as a “major health concern for university students” with “significant effects on student performance and a decrease in student success” (Lorenz et al., 2022, p. 1). Positive affect, known for its connection to coping with stress (Layous et al., 2014), and especially academic stress (Freire et al., 2016), plays a crucial role in influencing emotional responses to highly stressful events (Lorenz et al., 2022, p. 3). Among Be Positive participants, the ability to better cope with stress emerged as a recurring theme. Firstly, the participants explained how the program would act as a salient reminder “to stop, take a breath” and draw on their existing resources, such as “perspective” and “mindfulness” to better cope with stress. Other students explained how the program enhanced their “wellbeing as [they] could better understand how stress works”. However, most students explained that the program was helpful in better managing stress as it provided “coping mechanisms”, such as “dealing with stress triggers rather than fighting the stress itself” that they could use when stressful situations occurred. This application of existing and new resources in response to stress aligns with the behavioural prevention strategies advocated by Lorenz et al. (2022) for dealing with stressful situations. Moreover, it corresponds to the concept of a coping repertoire which Walters et al. (2020) explain as the ability

to positively reappraise a situation even when it is stressful. Be Positive students recognised that their coping repertoire had expanded, and they were better equipped with tools to manage stress, which could ultimately enhance their overall wellbeing.

Theme 3: Fostering Self-Regulation

Emotional regulation

The ability to increase and maintain positive emotions, whilst reducing negative emotions, is positively connected to student wellbeing as it enables students to better regulate their emotions in adverse situations and once emotions are regulated individuals can cope better (Zhoc et al., 2022). The Be Positive participants acknowledged an enhanced ability to employ concepts to better regulate emotion; for example, a student with an anxiety disorder was mindful that they could now apply strategies "to take a closer look at [their] negative thoughts before spiralling" and a student who had been in a "depressive cycle" was confident that the strategies could help them respond to situations with greater clarity. As emotional regulation is key to optimal mental health (Laasko et al., 2020), learning and applying strategies that facilitate emotional regulation have potential positive ramifications for wellbeing.

Kindness to themselves and others

Several students reported improvements in their cognitive understanding of self-compassion; for example, they stated that the program would act as a reminder "to be kinder to themselves" and "nicer about things that happen to me". Fong and Loi (2016) explain that students who can enact self-compassion experience better wellbeing and lower distress because they are more likely to self-soothe during difficulties and avoid the stress caused by harsh self-criticism, rumination, isolation and avoidance. Terry et al. (2013) note that self-compassion may support students as they transition into university, so fostering self-compassion could be a particularly salient emotion-regulation strategy for Enabling students' wellbeing. In line with the students in Laakso et al.'s (2020) intervention, Be Positive participants also demonstrated a greater capacity for understanding their peers' emotions and as well as expressing empathy, resolved to "take the time … to be more compassionate" or "considerate of other people" and to "find out" or "ask if someone is ok". This narrative demonstrates the program's potential efficacy to cultivate intrapersonal self-compassion and enhance interpersonal understanding and compassion, both of which have positive implications for wellbeing.

Help-seeking behaviours

Encouraging individuals to seek help aligns with the notion that acknowledging and addressing challenges is paramount for personal growth and wellbeing, a principle emphasised in Positive Psychology. Be Positive students demonstrated a proactive approach to their wellbeing, showing a heightened willingness to seek help when their overall wellness was at risk, opting for collaborative solutions over navigating challenges alone. As one student expressed, "Understanding self-doubt is normal, but instead of letting it take over, seek out help." Interestingly, this initial inclination to seek external support evolved over subsequent weeks as students increasingly resolved to autonomously manage their wellbeing by applying the Be Positive strategies. For example, one student stated: "When I am feeling overwhelmed, I will remember that I have options. Go back to this [program] and figure out which concept I should act upon". This help seeking behaviour contributes to the development of coping mechanisms

advocated by Walters and James (2020) as they found it not only fosters a proactive approach to seeking help but also empowers students with the internal resources to independently manage their wellbeing and navigate the demands of academic life.

Optimal Functioning/Thriving

Optimal functioning as a student is an advantageous and highly sought-after state of operating, both in terms of university achievement and student wellbeing. Optimal functioning for students in a university environment is defined by their capacity to actively engage with academia while effectively leveraging a robust psychological foundation. Along the same lines, Optimal Best Practice (OBP) is the term Positive Psychology has coined to express the process of maximising a person's potential through the pursuit of positive psycho-social functioning and attaining adaptive outcomes (Phan et al., 2020). Many responses from the Be Positive students noted how the program would help them perform "better" at university with several responses explicitly citing the concept of "thriving". For example, one student explained how the program will "remind [me] that whatever comes my way, I can get through it because I have that thrive attitude towards my studies". OBP recognises that for a person to thrive in an education setting, there must be a bedrock of psychological processes developed through educational practices (Phan et al., 2020). Through the provision of a toolbox of multiple psychological resources it seems that the Be Positive program has provided this foundation for students, so they can handle the demands of study, so they do not just survive at university, they thrive.

Theme 4: Implications

Implications for study

Academic efficacy is the belief that students can successfully complete academic tasks. Similar to students in Walters and James' (2020) intervention, Be Positive participants recognised that this program had positive implications for their immediate and subsequent academic studies. For example, one participant stated that "this [program] will aid me in the Program and in the future as well." Students also identified the specific areas of study supported by the strategies, with one noting, "It will be most useful for exams and assessments," while others associated it with grades, both in coping with disappointing results and in striving for higher marks.

Positive affect is also closely linked to academic self-efficacy (Oriol-Granado et al., 2017) and according to Martinie and Shankland (2024) plays a pivotal role in goal achievement. Several Be Positive students acknowledged a relationship between the program and goal achievement, noting the role that resilience played in achieving their goals and acknowledging that the program had provided them "with the motivation and strategies to help [them] achieve their goals to succeed at university". Participants also started to believe that they rightfully belonged in the academic setting, which James (2024) found creates a sense of belonging which can increase students' motivation to pursue their goals. Students from low-SES backgrounds, like many of the students in this study, often do not develop a close connection with university as they are hindered by cultural, socioeconomic, and social integration concerns (Habel et al., 2016). However, once students are assured of their place in the tertiary sector, motivation to pursue their objectives increases. This sense of belonging in the university community was exemplified by a student who felt empowered by a Be Positive video and stated "pursuing higher education is my objective, and I am capable of achieving it." Remaining motivated in the face of the inevitable obstacles of

university study is also key to academic efficacy as students are more likely to remain engaged with their studies (Oriol-Granado et al., 2017). Through students' reflections, it is evident that they are drawing connections between the program's strategies and their journey towards setting and achieving their goals as well as improved perceptions of academic efficacy, both of which can have positive implications for wellbeing.

Implications for life

Echoing findings in James and Walters (2020), the program also proved potentially valuable in the students' personal lives. Students could see how they could apply strategies “when under pressure at work”; when deciding “which career path to take” and in all “situations that will help [me] grow as a person so I can learn what not to do again”. The Be Positive program's reach also extended socially, as exemplified by a student who had “no social circle” and found solace and enjoyment in the “social connectedness” fostered by the program. This social connectedness can help students transition into university (Wilcox & Nordstokke, 2019). Some students also expressed their intention to share the strategies they were learning with their families, with one stating, "I am going to share what I have learnt with my kids as I can see that this will also benefit them." The findings highlight the program's versatility, revealing that its impact has the potential to extend beyond academia to positively influence student lives and social interactions, and contribute to their overall thriving in a more holistic way.

Limitations and Future Research

Statistical power issues exist within this study because the overall sample size was small. The number of study participants dropped as the data was collected from Week 1 to Week 12; therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, especially in Weeks 9 to 12, when the sample size is smaller than the other weeks. Increasing the sample size by inviting and encouraging all Enabling students to voluntarily participate in the study would be useful. Trialling the program with other cohorts, such as undergraduate and high school students, would also determine the transferability of the program to diverse contexts and highlight the role of individual differences in response to the program.

There are several avenues for further exploration. Firstly, inferential statistics, which use matched data to chart each student’s response to their perceptions of their wellbeing and the program’s resources, would be beneficial. Statistical significance of the results could also be gleaned through an analysis of Be Positive students’ responses about their perceptions of their wellbeing against an inactive control group of Enabling students enrolled in the same unit of study who do not take part in the Be Positive program. Secondly, a follow up study with the students in this paper would be instructive to see if the students were implementing the strategies and determining whether this implementation had made a difference to their wellbeing in the longer term.

Conclusion

There is a compelling need to enhance the support provided to Enabling students through a holistic approach that goes beyond academic assistance to prioritise their psychological wellbeing. Positive psychology interventions have shown success in providing such support, yet

a noticeable gap exists in the implementation of multi-component positive psychology interventions in Enabling programs within universities. The Be Positive program was created to address this gap. Initial findings provided a snapshot into the Be Positive students' perceptions of their wellbeing and revealed fluctuating but generally positive levels of wellbeing among participants throughout the 12-week duration, with peak wellbeing observed towards the end of the program. The fluctuating levels of wellbeing aligned with typical stress patterns observed among Enabling students at the beginning and middle of the term, but the wellbeing recorded by the Be Positive participants was more positive than that recorded in previous research by Nieuwoudt (2021) into enabling students' wellbeing. The findings from our research provide a useful contextualisation to further explore the impacts that the program could have on the participants' current and future wellbeing. Initial analysis of participants' free-text questionnaire responses revealed four overarching themes, with each theme highlighting the program's potential efficacy in empowering students to cultivate positive cognitive restructuring, sustain optimistic perspectives, develop resilience, cope with stress, regulate emotions, and foster self-compassion. These themes suggest that the Be Positive program has the potential to contribute to enhanced wellbeing and academic efficacy. Moreover, the program's impact extended beyond academia, with students recognising its value in their personal lives and social interactions. Despite the study's limitations, including potential bias in participant selection and lack of a control group, the findings underscore the importance of proactive interventions like the Be Positive program in supporting Enabling students' holistic development and fostering a thriving university community. As such, these insights can inform future interventions and initiatives aimed at promoting student wellbeing and success.

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