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Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Future-ready from year one: Student experiences in a skills-focused, tech-enabled first-year psychology subject

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In an era of accelerated technological and societal change, the employability of graduates is an urgent concern for tertiary education institutions (Clarke, 2018). Graduates are increasingly expected to demonstrate teamwork, emotional intelligence, and lifelong learning skills alongside disciplinary expertise (Haselberger et al., 2012; Moore & Morton, 2017). However, evidence shows a lack of transferable skills among new graduates (Hurrell, 2016), and many curricula still lack explicit integration of these capabilities.

In response to calls for the embedding of transferable skills into undergraduate curricula, the first-year subject Applied Psychology (PSY1APP) was recently developed at La Trobe University to develop work-ready competencies in psychology students. PSY1APP incorporates a range of assessments (including an unconventional reflective e-portfolio) which facilitate personal and professional growth and align with the competency-based learning models recommended in psychology education (Jhangiani & Hardin, 2015; Naufel et al., 2019). The subject also enhances engagement and authenticity through a variety of innovative digital learning tools – such as video interviews with psychology alumni embedded into the Learning Management System and the e-portfolio assessment – which further demystify career pathways and model diverse applications of psychology skills and knowledge.

A qualitative study was conducted to explore students' engagement with PSY1APP and obtain feedback as part of a co-design process (Cooper & Krishnan, 2020). It comprised four focus groups with a total of 14 participants (10 women and 4 men, aged between 18 and 52 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 31.6$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.1$) who had recently completed PSY1APP at La Trobe University. Focus groups had an average duration of 64 minutes and were conducted 3-5 weeks after the end of semester.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023) resulted in three broad themes, each comprising between two and three subthemes. 1) *Personal Development*: students described transformative impacts on their self-knowledge, relationships, and perspective. The subject promoted metacognitive thinking and empowered students to apply psychological principles to their own lives, relationships, and wellbeing. 2) *Expanding Horizons*: the subject offered insight into the 'real world' of work in psychology, exposing students to diverse applications and helping them reimagine possible futures, moving beyond traditional pathways such as clinical psychology. 3) *Tension Between Breadth and Depth*: while some students appreciated the wide scope of topics, others expressed a desire for deeper engagement with specific content, highlighting the ongoing challenge of designing adaptable learning environments that are both inclusive and personalised. These insights have prompted improvements to the PSY1APP curriculum and have positioned PSY1APP as a key subject in the current employability-focused re-design of the undergraduate psychology course at La Trobe.

The results of this study show that through authentic and digitally enhanced curriculum design, the building of employability skills need not be restricted to placements and final-year subjects. Instead, digital tools such as reflective e-portfolios and multimedia case studies can support students to become resilient, future-focused learners. PSY1APP offers actionable insights for educators across disciplines wishing to embed applied skill development and innovative digital assessment types into undergraduate curricula for deep learning, transformative change and student wellbeing.

Keywords: graduate employability, work-ready skills, work-integrated learning, applied psychology, qualitative.

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