

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

From classroom to career: Work-ready skill acquisition in an innovative first-year psychology subject

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A national and global gap in transferrable work-ready skills among new graduates has led to calls both internationally (Strohmetz et al., 2015) and within Australia (Hamilton et al., 2018) for the adoption of a competency-based approach to curriculum design, focusing on skill acquisition as well as discipline knowledge (Jhangiani & Hardin, 2015). Despite this, undergraduate programs still often lack structured opportunities for students to develop generalisable skills that are highly valued by employers, such as resilience, critical thinking and reflective practice.

Responding to this gap, the subject Applied Psychology (PSY1APP) was recently developed at La Trobe University to build work-ready competencies in psychology students. PSY1APP promotes deep active learning and strong student engagement through peer-to-peer knowledge construction, experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and innovative digital tools. These include a unique reflective e-portfolio assessment, and video interviews with psychology alumni which are embedded into the Learning Management System and the e-portfolio, enhancing the authenticity of taught material and bridging the gap between psychology theory and practice.

The current study aimed to examine the effectiveness of PSY1APP in increasing students' generalisable skills and knowledge using a mixed-methods longitudinal study. Participants were 60 students (83.3% women, 15% men, 1.7% gender non-binary, $M_{\text{age}} = 24.6$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.86$) who undertook PSY1APP in 2023. Students completed pre- and post-semester surveys measuring variables such as mindfulness, stress management and wellbeing. Qualitative open-ended text feedback was also solicited at post-test regarding students' experience of the subject.

Paired-sample *t*-tests revealed that upon completion of the subject, students practiced more mindfulness and stress management behaviours than at the beginning of semester; these effects were small to moderate in size. Students also reported improved attitudes and knowledge regarding reflective practices, stress management, behaviour change and teamwork; these effects were moderate to large in size. Thematic content analysis on open-ended feedback (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) revealed three main themes: students have improved 1) knowledge, 2) personal growth and 3) understanding of the connection of psychology to real life. Transformative change was driven by the use of digital tools such as the e-portfolio, enabling students to develop competencies such as reflective practice and project themselves into future professional roles. However, an increase in negative affect and a decrease in overall well-being were also observed, suggesting the need for additional support mechanisms.

Our findings suggest that the deliberate integration of generalisable skills and innovative digital technologies into the undergraduate curriculum can meaningfully enhance students' career-relevant capabilities, including mindfulness, stress management, reflective practice, behaviour change techniques, and teamwork. Given the limited opportunities for structured, career-focused skill development in undergraduate programs—particularly outside of placements and final-year subjects—PSY1APP represents a future-focused model. It offers a compelling example for educators in diverse disciplines seeking to embed professional readiness early in the student learning journey.

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

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