

# **Challenging Perceptions : ‘Positive’ Universities - Exploring student experience through Positive Psychology**

## **Introduction**

We are at a pivotal moment in higher education, where positive initiatives could be imperative to securing future well-being. Even before COVID-19 provoked the current emergency, student mental health was considered to be in crisis (Ibrahim et al., 2012). Not only do universities provide academic education, they also serve as a premise for the development of interpersonal connections, and the chance to explore choices. Unfortunately, the structures and the environment in which positive practices can flourish, are challenged by the situation. Prioritizing extrinsic motivations (e.g. grades) negates natural intrinsic motivations, as defined by Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Students feel unable to participate in discussions that would prioritize a better environment and mental health. I firmly believe that the concept of a positive institution, that values well-being, is a field that merits further research. Despite the consensus that positivity is to be encouraged, there is a lack of literature and research in the university sphere (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

As an International student, I have experienced a range of institutional environments and online learning. I identify with and acknowledge that current situations and policies can exacerbate a negative experience for students, and therefore, I am motivated to research the subject further. I attended a virtual workshop by Dr. William Ryan, who inspired me to explore the field of Positive Psychology: specifically, the instigation of positive practices in institutions.

COVID-19 provides both an additional challenge and an opportunity to examine and reimagine how Positive Psychology and Self-determination theory can be applied to meet psychological needs effectively, in both traditional and online learning. Positive psychology emphasizes ‘optimizing’ personal development, and extending this beyond just minimal outcomes (Gable & Haidt, 2005). I would research student feedback with regard to what positive approaches can be implemented, and how institutional practices can be restructured, in order for universities to progress towards a more positive ethos. In due course, I would analyze positive mechanisms, such as autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020), to assess how they can be enhanced.

We need to consider what our institutional goals are. It is imperative to emphasize the role of well-being and positivity, in order to mitigate the effects of some inevitable changes.

## **Research Question**

What are the most effective components of a positive university experience, and what are the biggest barriers to a positive individual and collective experience?

## **Methodology**

I will be employing a Multi-method approach in this project, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative design. I plan to administer a survey to the undergraduate student body at the University of Toronto by using Qualtrics, an online and encrypted survey platform. My analyses will consist of both quantitative analysis of the connections between measures, as well as a qualitative analysis of open-ended responses, which would allow me to collate common themes and issues in students' answers. This project can be completed within the given 6 week timeframe. I plan to spend the first week conducting thorough survey-design related literature review and refining my survey questions, and the next three weeks extensively advertising my survey, and completing further, more detailed literature review. For the final two weeks, I will be collating my results, and engaging in data and statistical analysis.

Firstly, in addition to basic demographic information, I would also like to collect other pertinent demographic information, as it is relevant to my research. I will also be asking open-ended (qualitative) questions about students' current experiences, concerns, and the solutions they envision. Furthermore, I will be using validated measures of mental health, stress, and basic psychological need fulfilment. Measures would include existing Likert scales, as well as personalized, self-designed Likert Scales.

I will use SPSS for quantitative analyses, and the Linguistic Coding software LIWC (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015) to identify common themes in narratives. I would then outline the major concerns raised, and study the organizational culture of the university, student satisfaction, and student loyalty to the institution: all factors that inform positive experiences and well-being.

I will be advertising my survey through social media, student groups, and university subject pools, using raffles to incentivize participation. I would ensure that the survey is a reasonable length to ensure completion, and a high response rate. In addition to recruiting student participants at University of Toronto, I will also be collaborating with researchers at the University of Reading, United Kingdom, to collect parallel data there as well. This will be done entirely online through surveys and video conferencing platforms.

## **Research advisor**

I am honoured to have Dr. William Ryan serve as my advisor for this project. Dr. Ryan played an integral role in encouraging my interest in Positive Psychology, and his unending support has been invaluable to me throughout this application process. He is willing to serve as my advisor for the duration of the program, and will guide me through survey design and statistical analysis. He is already in the process of obtaining Research Ethics Board (REB) approval. His international collaborator, Dr. Netta Weinstein at the University of Reading

(UK), has confirmed that she is willing to serve as a collaborator to help me expand my research.

### **Outcomes**

My research spans across and integrates multiple disciplines. It examines the social structure of groups in a sociological context, and stems from academic approaches employed by the psychological disciplines of Industrial and Organisational Behaviour, as well as Positive and Social Psychology. My experience as an international student has demonstrated that there is a wide variety of institutional practices globally. I would be enthusiastic to identify both differences and similarities both nationally and internationally. In the initial stages of my project, I plan to start research at my current University, the University of Toronto and at the University of Reading, United Kingdom, and then aim to expand to other Universities in Canada and the Anglosphere. Opportunities may include research at universities in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, which would prompt research that I plan to extend further.

My main research goal is to identify the impact of university environments on well-being, as well as examining the necessary components of a 'positive' university experience. I would also compile a report of recommendations for senior management at the university, and a white paper that I hope will prompt discussion and lead to action in the field. I would also hope my research can be published, both in University Academic Journals and other Positive Psychology Journals. At this moment in history, we have been given the opportunity to reimagine current structures, and consider implementing more positive practices and policies that would allow individuals and institutions to flourish. Lastly, I would also hope this would inform my future approaches to leadership, and help me to attain a deeper understanding of positive psychology with regard to my own personal growth.

## References

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