The Importance of an Increased Focus on Developing the "Whole Student" during and beyond Their Time at Higher Education, with a Particular Focus on First-Year Student

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Abstract

This is a theoretical document for the consideration of how we can enhance overall students' academic and overall wellbeing. Because first-year students' transition into higher education is particularly important for their remaining time at higher education, and to diminish their risk of attrition after their first year, this group will be particularly focused on. However, a focus on the "whole student" is important for all their time at university in the whole world. Also, considering the recently enhanced legal educational requirements with regards to overall student wellbeing for New Zealand tertiary institutions, there is for them an even more clear rationale for NZ tertiary institutions to focus on this topic. This article is aimed at advocating for an increased focus on the whole student development, drawing on much of our research so far, as well as research from across the world.

Keywords

Whole Student, First-Year Student Transition, Wellbeing

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 situation has highlighted quite a few wellbeing issues for university students. For example, sense of connectedness and belonging because in many cases students were not allowed to come to class but had to study on-line (Zhai, 2020). Also, students in many cases have not been able to work together with other students in a face-to-face way, or develop particular academic skills. And because students have to be working more on-line, some of the deal with specific

technology related challenges (Burns et al., 2020).

Although it could be argued that because of current COVID-19 context there is wellbeing for many university students, higher education sectors have been faced with quite a few wellbeing challenges over the last few decades (Auerbach et al., 2018; Haggis, 2004). One of these challenges is the rapid technology development, in particular the computer hardware and software development over the last few decades such as the birth of the internet and mobile technology equipment, and related communication development, such as social media. This has also resulted in increased development of, and access to enormous amount of knowledge. Other technological changes such as development of more planes resulted in easier travelling and transporting around the world. These technological developments have resulted in ongoing changes in the labour market. And because of internationalisation and a rise of a global knowledge economy there has been a rise in the need for a more highly cognitively developed workforce and lesser manual labour force (Marginson, 2010).

For the higher education sector these changes have resulted world-wide in massification, and a related increase of a diversity of the student population (Lomas, 2001; Scott, 1995). However, the increase of the diversity of the student population in most countries over the last few decades did not just relate to more diverse students from the domestic population, but also from other countries. This resulted partly from the development of internationalisation which is the consequence partly of the ease of international travel and technological innovations. There has also been an increase of migration and numbers of refugees across the world based partly on terrorism, wars, economic poverty and other social issues. And this has resulted in the development of the diversity in populations beyond just ethnic diversity, for example religious, linguistic, moral, and lifestyle diversity. This gave rise to the concept of "super-diversity" (Vertovec, 2007, 2019) which relates to multi-dimensional conditions and processes that affect not necessarily just immigrants and ethnic minorities, but also the wider population. Internationalization of the higher education sector and global economy has given rise to the need for all students to develop inter-cultural competency (Deardorff, 2004, 2006, 2009), which includes appreciation of diversity.

The rise overall across the world of mental and overall wellbeing issues has been higher for education students' mental wellbeing issues (Auerbach et al., 2018; Duncan et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge, 2011). This includes for example, communication issues in social media (e.g. upward social comparison and cyber bullying) (Craig et al., 2020; Faelens et al., 2021). Also, ongoing greater awareness of terrible events across the world (e.g. terrorism acts, murders, wars, natural disasters), global issues (e.g. climate change risks) may contribute to mental health issues. All of these issues may have contributed to the significant rise of mental health issues in the higher education sector (Auerbach et al., 2018). However, this may also be partly related to the fact that most students enter higher education in a critical developmental stage of their lives, often referred to

now as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). This is the stage when young people are in the process of developing their identity in a now far more diverse and less stable time, with potential thinking about a far less certain work-life future in an ongoing changing labour force environment.

All these challenges raise a need for research into the broader context to identify how we can better support the diverse student population as they transition into higher education, but also how we can prepare them for a positive experience during and beyond their time in higher education. I am strongly convinced that the higher education sector, has a societal responsibility to not just focus on students as learners of knowledge and/or professional skills, but also to support them in being developed as "whole students".

It is important that most universities start developing the whole student. This article is therefore, aimed at advocating for an increased focus on the whole student development, drawing on research from many others. But in particular I will be drawing on much of my own research, as well other research within my university. This will be with regards to different aspects related to the whole student development. So, this article is not reporting on research I have done specifically with regards to whole student development at our university so far, but brings together findings and information from previous research related to different aspects that can be associated with my particular assumption of what the whole student development is about. So, no attention is paid to detailed research procedures.

The rationale for choosing all the specific contexts and subjects in this article is based on the overall increased development over the last few decades of an understanding of what contributes to wellbeing, and what can contribute to a better experience and related overall success of university students. So the emphasis of this study is on the integration of these many developed aspects related to my perspective of the overall structure of the whole student development.

2. Developing the "Whole Student": Possible Ways forward to Enhance First-Year Transition for Diverse Student Groups and Their Ongoing Lives

I belief that making an argument for developing the "whole student" is not just really beneficial for a diversity of students, but also for higher education institutions and overall society.

It could be argued that traditionally many higher education institutions have focused mainly, or only, on developing their students to become knowledge and/or technical experts in a particular field/disciplinary area. As Seal et al. (2011) articulated, students are then often not fully equipped to more comprehensively capitalise on their academic knowledge. So they argued that universities must focus on the "whole student". They argue that when this is done "students who are able to develop their capacity to understand themselves, the world around them, build meaningful relationships, and foster positive changes have an advantage in school, work, and life" (Seal et al., 2011: 2).

Wolf-Wendel and Ruel (1999) in discussing the ideal of developing the "whole student", drawing on a wide range of researchers in higher education, suggest that students need to be supported in dealing with various crises/challenges during their time at university, for example by developing academic competence, managing emotions, moving towards interdependence, developing mature relationships, establishing identity, and developing their purpose in life. They conclude that there needs to be a focus on "developing the whole student in a partnership among faculty, administrators and students. Knowing who our students are, having high expectations of them, and making them feel that they matter will help us to better develop the whole student" (p. 44). The referral to developing academic competencies is likely to include supporting students with their basic needs with regards to literacy, numeracy, and basic academic study techniques, especially during their transition time in their first year.

As mental health issues have risen for higher education, there has also been a greater focus on the importance of wellbeing in developing the whole student (Jayawickreme & Dahill-Brown, 2016; Johnson et al., 2019). Jayawickreme & Dahill-Brown (2016) point at the importance to consider the diversity of students and recommend that "educators should be encouraged to consider well-being in a holistic manner that ensures that the education of the whole student is promoted without prioritizing one aspect of well-being and character above others" (Jayawickreme & Dahill-Brown, 2016: 481). Supporting students in developing the different facets of their wellbeing could all together reduce psychological/mental health issues. Although this could benefit all students studying in higher education, this would particularly benefit students in the emerging adulthood developmental stage of their life (Arnett, 2000). Braskamp (2009: 29) pointed out that: "the focus on creating a viable environment for students to develop holistically can be summed up by the phrase 'It takes a whole campus of whole persons to develop whole students' ".

In summary, there are different ways to describe "whole student development". I propose that this could be described comprehensively as:

Whole student development in higher education could be understood as contributing to the development of students' appreciation of higher education study/learning approaches, academic study skills, identity awareness, appreciation of diversity, and overall well-being capacities, including their intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual capacities. This development is aimed at contributing to students' academic success, employability, civic-mindedness and a positive resilient holistic wellbeing future, not only during their time at higher education, but also beyond.

Spirituality is sometimes misunderstood as being related to religion only, but generally is considered to include having a sense that life has meaning and purpose (even when confronted with adversity) and a sense of identity, self-awareness and connectedness with others, nature and the universe. In research at the University of Otago about first-year students' sense of spirituality, it became clear that most

respondents had a real need to engage with their sense of meaning and purpose at that stage of their life (Wright, 2019). It is important therefore to ensure students are supported in this area. Diversity is closely connected to a sense of identity. It is very important that first-year students are helped to develop a greater sense of their identity, and are helped to feel that they matter, and that other students also matter.

In students' transition, and during their first year in higher education to feel that they matter helps them with their sense of belonging, which contributes to their overall wellbeing (Sopoaga et al., 2018). At an institutional level it is important that there is an explicit policy focused on equity and diversity that could be shared with students from early on when they transition into their institution. For example the University of Otago in their Equity and Diversity Policy articulate that it "is committed to equity and diversity and seeks to provide an accessible, inclusive, respectful and welcoming environment in which all students and staff are supported towards achieving their full potential" (University of Otago, n.d.). That policy also indicates the range of diversity. Considering the New Zealand context, ethnicity comes first, with a particular focus on the importance of the role of the indigenous Māori population. The Pacific Island population is also specifically mentioned. Then other groups are mentioned: students and staff with disability and/or impairment; students who are first in their family to attend university; LGBTIQ students and staff; students from low socio-economic backgrounds; students and staff from migrant and/or refugee backgrounds and those whose first language is not English, and women where there are barriers to access and/or success. In the formal academic convocation (welcoming ceremony) of all first-year students (in the local stadium at the beginning of orientation week) students are made aware of this. This possibly starts the diverse students' population sense that they all matter. It has become clear that a focus on supporting the LGBTQ/rainbow community in particular can impact positively on first-year students who are wanting to further develop their identity and express their sexual orientation (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). For the last few years, the New Zealand national "Rainbow Tick" organisation hast started to work with individual organisations and companies to develop a fully supportive environment. In 2018 the University of Otago was the first New Zealand university to be accredited with the official "Rainbow Tick". Lastly, particularly focused funding by national governments to support diverse student groups can also make a difference. In New Zealand for example, the government provides equity funding to universities for new initiatives to support Māori and Pacific Island students.

In Europe there has been a greater focus on the whole student in education quite recently. After many years of research (Caena & Punie, 2019), in 2020 the European Union established a "Life Comp" (Life Competencies) framework because "in a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world, each person will need a wide range of skills and competences and to develop them continually throughout life" (Sala et al., 2020: 7). They stated that this is important across

the different education sectors, including higher education. The European Union is convinced that education based on this framework promotes students' mental health, academic achievement, and employability over time. They also belief that implementing the "Life Comp framework" through the educational system may contribute to achieving the United Nations objective of Sustainable Development Goals, which includes appreciation of cultural diversity. They make it clear that students having a comfortable awareness of who they are and their identity is important for their wellbeing. The European Union in their research made it clear that cultural awareness and expression are also related to academic competencies.

From the overall research and my own research, it has become clear that there are many different facets that are related to and contributing to the whole student. I also think it is important to start focusing more on multi-level integrated longitudinal research related to the whole student to help higher education institutions bring about further interventions or enhance their current interventions (van der Meer, 2021). In he following diagram I provide a draft conceptual overview of the chosen facets related to developing the whole student (and the suggested related research foci) that will be further covered in this article (Figure 1).

3. Developing a Greater Focus on 21st Century Life-Long Active Learning/Teaching Approaches

A greater focus on life-long and active learning can contribute significantly to
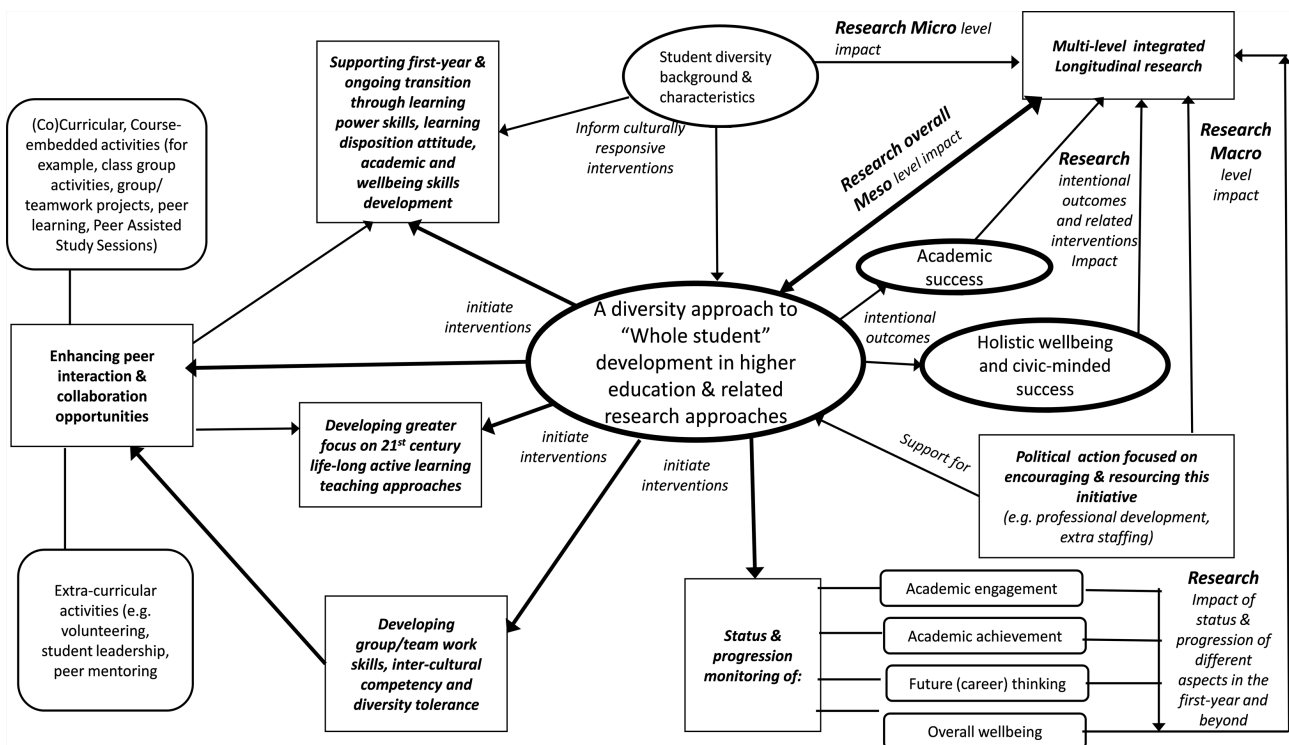

Figure 1. Conceptual overview of a whole-student facets.

the whole student, in particular their transition into their first year and academic and social integration because it enhances their peer interaction and development of friendships. Braxton et al. (2000) focused in particular on these benefits for students: "active learning course practices may directly influence social integration and indirectly affect subsequent institutional commitment and student departure decisions" (Braxton et al., 2000: 572).

The concepts of "active learning" (Roehl et al., 2013) and the related concept of "flipped classrooms" (Chellapan et al., 2018) partly relate to technological changes. Active learning is a term used for teaching/learning approaches focused on students' engagement in the learning process through dialogical interactive learning activities, rather than only content-centred monological content transmission by lecturers. Also, the concept of "heutagogy" is relevant as it may be considered a more contemporary relationships between students and knowledge (Hase & Kenyon, 2000, 2007). Heutagogy is a teaching/learning approach that is more focused on students' self-determination in the learning process and includes formal and informal learning opportunities.

It could be argued that because of the ongoing technological developments and related changing world, the focus of education in the 21st century should more and more shift from just knowledge transmission to cultivating lifelong effective learners (Peng & Wang, 2020). This relates to the idea that lecturers should operate more on the principle of knowledge abundance rather than knowledge scarcity (Weller, 2011). This means that students no longer have to rely only on traditional lecture delivery to obtain knowledge in a particular place and time. This would mean that because of the abundance of content accessible in other ways, teachers should focus more on being facilitators in the learning environment to develop life-long and actively engaged learning and critical thinking.

4. Enhancing Peer Interaction

Peer interaction is very important for students as they transition into higher education and during their first year. Peer interaction is also closely connected to the issue of diversity. Through interacting with other diverse students they can learn more about diversity, but also learn more about their own identity, and gain other benefits: "the potential benefits of group work and other interactive teaching strategies in higher education include increased student motivation and improved communication between students in culturally diverse classes, as well as a deeper engagement with discussion and analysis" (Keating et al., 2020: 42).

Therefore, developing the whole student could benefit from a greater focus in curricula on developing students' inter-relational engagement with other students, and their intercultural competency. This could be done for example by including more group activities during class (all sort of classes, whether lectures, tutorials, workshops, laboratories etc.) and team/group sessions or projects outside of class. This may benefit students' development of tolerance for diversity,

inter-cultural communication, and overall sense of connectedness and sense of belonging (Deardorff, 2004, 2006, 2009; Einfalt, 2020). Einfalt also specifically identified that it promotes students' transition.

Interestingly, students from more collectivist cultures may benefit more greatly from peer interaction and collaboration. This was found in my analysis of data from all New Zealand universities related to students engagement. It was found that the ethnic groups of Māori and Pacific Island students did indeed appreciate this more than other ethnic groups, such as New Zealand European students (van der Meer, 2011).

Considering the differences in students' appreciation of peer interaction and related activities, it is important that all students more fully understand the rationale for academic staff to get students involved in peer interaction activities and group/team work, and the importance of learning how to work together (van der Meer, 2009, 2012). In particular in the first year students need to be made clear what the purpose is for their activities and the overall goal of learning. One aspect to focus on in explaining the rationale to students is how developing skills and comfort to work with others can contribute not only to their sense of belonging, but also to their employability, and that in many universities teamwork is included in their official graduate outcomes. Helping students to understand the rationale for what, and how, they are asked to learn also enhances their sense of purpose and meaning. And all of this contributes to their sense of wellbeing and thereby the whole student development.

5. Developing Group/Team Work Skills, Inter-Cultural Competency and Diversity Tolerance

Considering the importance of peer interaction, students working together, intercultural competence, and students' tolerating of diversity, they need to be purposefully supported in developing their skills and attitudes for working with diverse other students in groups, especially in the first year (Einfalt, 2020; Nelson et al., 2007). In one of the Australian universities they decided to create a "Teamwork protocol" for academic teaching staff to support them in setting up group/team work for first-year students as part of a project to enhance the transition of first-year students (Nelson et al., 2017). This included a recognition of the benefits of diversity in groups.

6. Supporting Extra-Curricular Activities

Developing the whole student also means that a greater focus needs to be on supporting students to be involved in extra-curricular activities. This can have positive benefits for students and help them personally, but also may develop a greater appreciation of student diversity in their institution and their sense of belonging. Research in Australia and New Zealand has proven that the benefits include meaningful interaction with peers, interaction with people from different backgrounds, understanding of people from different backgrounds, mean-

ingful interaction with staff members, desire to stay at institution and graduate, and employability skills (van der Meer et al., 2019). An international comparative study including students from the US, Canada, the UK, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand related to the same research has showed that these results are similar in these different countries, and that connectedness and other wellbeing aspects are all connected (van der Meer et al., 2022). Also many different extra-curricular activities for university students, such as mentoring and volunteering activities to help other students or people in their communities can contribute to their civic mindedness and sense of compassion.

7. Supporting First-Year Students and Ongoing Transition through Development of Learning Power and Learning Disposition Skills

Supporting first-year students in their transition to higher education can be done through many different approaches, and there has been quite some research focussed on this.

It could be argued that more generally, universities cannot expect all secondary schools to have prepared students adequately for their transition into university. Also, considering the increasing internationalisation of universities, students do not necessarily come from their country. Many universities have international students, and increasingly also immigrant students from refugee backgrounds. Considering that the cultural context and diversity of each university could be considered to be different, it could be argued that all universities should take a more universal approach and accept responsibility to develop all students' academic and social emotional adjustment that is relevant to their context and the diversity of their student body.

I would argue that the social responsibility of higher education is of particular importance for the transition period and the first year of students in higher education. Because this would support students as effective learners in their first year, but in a broad sense also for the remainder of their time in higher education and beyond.

Much research has found out that being an effective learner requires two main aspects: capabilities and learning dispositions (Deakin Crick, 2007; Deakin Crick et al., 2015). Capabilities relates to learning skills and learning strategies. Learning disposition relates to students' orientation towards learning, and habits of mind and how they respond to certain situations. A positive learning disposition may support them in particular on their learning journey to their desired goals. Developing capabilities and learning dispositions can be supported by "Learning Power": a range of competencies that are important for academic success in the complex, networked, information-rich and uncertain world of the twenty-first century (Deakin Crick, 2007). This capacity and self-awareness of intentionally learning how to learn includes developing students' learning identity, learning relationships and their learning story (Deakin Crick, 2007). Learning disposi-

tions have particular benefits for students' holistic wellbeing.

Learning dispositions have gained an increased focus in educational research over the last decade when focusing on students' academic success. Learning dispositions have been identified as also very important for life beyond university, when students start their working life. Learning dispositions are strongly related to the psychological constructs of "resilience" and "growth mindset" (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), i.e. how students deal with setbacks, challenges and uncertainties, and how they adapt to these and change positively. Resilience and growth mindset also support them in developing their capabilities and how they deal with failures or mistakes. A sense of agency also plays an important role. Having a sense of agency means that students feel capable of controlling many aspects of their life, for example controlling many of their thoughts, behaviour, tasks and handle situations that occur (Deakin Crick et al., 2015). This is related to the concept of self-efficacy (Wilcox & Nordstokke, 2019).

What can contribute to developing learning power? There are many different approaches. The following five approaches are based on some of the research related to this (Caena & Punie, 2019; Deakin et al., 2015; Peng & Wang, 2020):

- Develop a wide range of learning skills;
- Develop mindfulness-based practices (openness to experiences and emotion regulation);
- Develop awareness through reflection on learning in practice and on oneself;
- Identify and further develop character strengths;
- Develop narrative learner identity.

At the University of Otago, we have started a transition programme pilots to support two particular equity groups to develop their "learning power". In these pilot transition programs we have focused intentionally not just on the first-year transition but also on supporting students' development of skills that would help their resilience, academic success and holistic wellbeing throughout their university life, but also beyond. One of the main foci in resilience development is to help people to recognise that changes happen throughout our lives and to accept the challenges that may come with that. To deal with this it is important to reflect on how transitions/changes/challenges in the past were dealt with, the strengths they drew on, and also to accept that they can keep on learning new skills. These were the intentional foci, with related activities, in our pilot transition programmes.

The following diagram shows the broad conceptual overview of what a transition programme may look like and how this relates to overall student success. It reflects the research related to the importance and essence of resilience, the three main components of the European LifeComp framework discussed above, and the concept of Learning Power. Our University of Otago transition pilot course has incorporated most of this (Figure 2).

The teaching of a transition support programme and other support interventions for first-year students can be considered at multiple levels. Apart from the
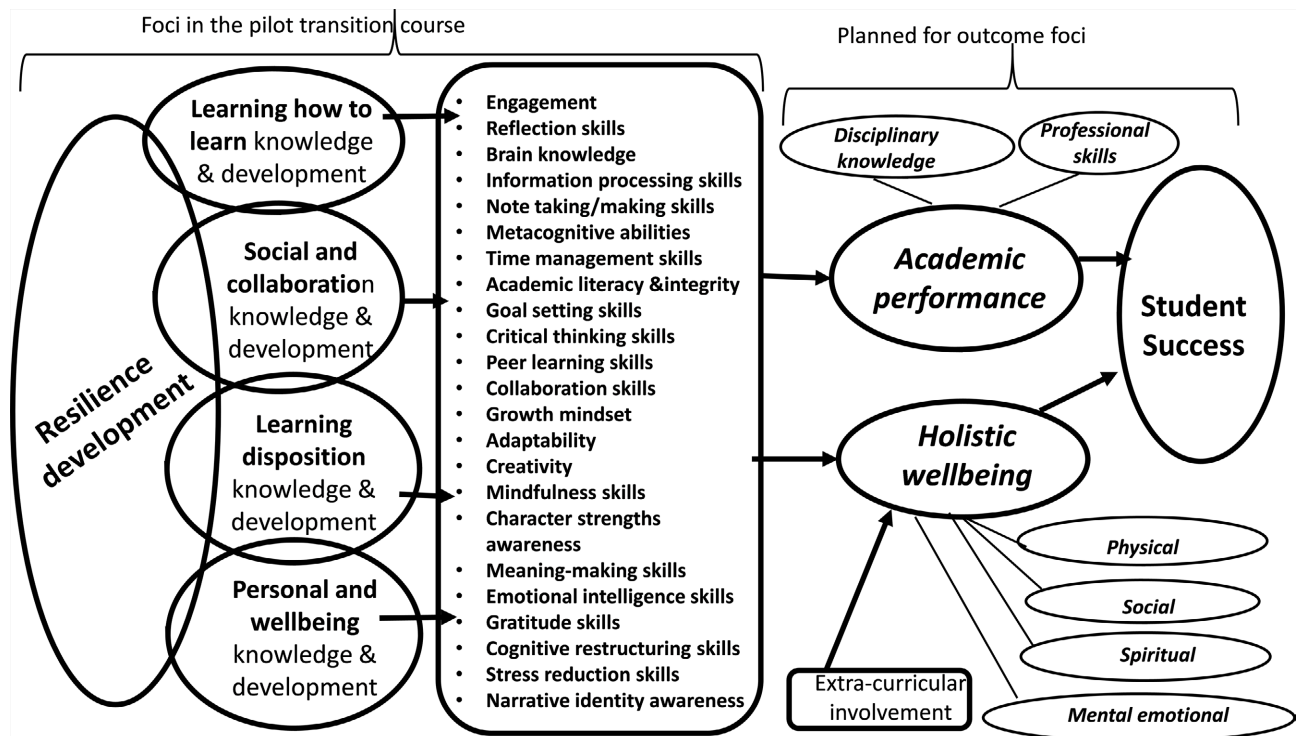
Figure 2. Conceptual overview of a whole-student developing transition programme.

many academic skills, learning dispositions and wellbeing skills included in a transition course that may contribute to student success, an overall supportive institutional and teaching/learning environment can also play an important role in contributing to students' transition and overall success. This includes a focus on diversity as discussed above.

In the country of New Zealand, at the governmental level, a Pastoral Care Code has been developed, which includes a requirement for higher education institutions to support the wellbeing, achievement of tertiary students, as appropriate and reasonable in the circumstances of each student. and to ensure that students are assisted by providers to adjust to tertiary study and also to monitor their academic achievement and engagement.

Even though the transition programme for the two equity groups in our university is worthwhile, these were a pilot. We are now working on an on-line co-curricular programme for all first-year students after they have started, and this may include most the activities we developed in the pilot transition programme.

8. Mentoring Support and Overall Progression Monitoring

The combination of academic and social integration has long been evidenced as one of the main contributors to first-year students' transition, success and retention (see e.g. Braxton et al., 2000; Noyens et al., 2019). So one of the key beneficial approaches would be that all first-year students would have a staff and/or peer mentor who would support them in their academic and social integration. There is an enormous amount of research about the benefits of mentoring for

first-year students. Most of this relates to peer mentoring. For example Collings et al. (2014) in their research established that students who were not peer-mentored were four times more likely to consider abandoning university than peer-mentored students. However, staff mentoring has also been shown to be effective. In some cases, staff members mentor both students and the peer mentors (Akinla et al., 2018). Mentoring of first-year students helps them to get both a sense of belonging and provide easy access to support when needed. Also, mentors can play an active role to support students who have been identified as struggling academically and underachieving as this has been proven in our mentoring programme focused on support of Pacific student in the first year of a health science degree (Sopoaga et al., 2017).

Considering the many facets of the whole student, it is important to monitor their progression in various aspects during their time at university. For example, at the University of Otago the Office of Student Success has started to monitor first-year students' academic achievement in the first semester and encourage a range of people (e.g. residential college staff and other support staff for non-residential college students) to engage with the under-achieving students in the beginning of the second semester to support them. However, unfortunately not all under-achieving students are contacted, and even when contacted, not all students respond to the invitation to meet a staff member. The latter may be partly due to these students not feeling comfortable enough to talk to these people because they don't know them and/or know them well enough. If students would have staff and/or peer mentors they might feel much more comfortable with them because they would have had some more contact and ideally feel more connected to them.

One of the reasons for under-achievement we identified at our university was when students did not fully engage in their course, or in their support programme during the first semester (Beatson et al., 2020; Sopoaga et al., 2017; van der Meer et al., 2018).

9. Integrated Multi-Level Longitudinal Research

For the whole student development, more holistic progression monitoring is an area that may need far more attention and related research. As mentioned above the New Zealand Pastoral Care Code clearly articulates that universities must maintain appropriate oversight of student achievement and engagement; and therefore need to regularly review teaching and learning approaches that respond to the needs of students. Also, systematically gathering data from progression monitoring can contribute positively to integrated multi-level longitudinal research approaches that will enable potential identification of issues and factors that may particularly impact positively or negatively impact on students' overall academic achievement and wellbeing. And this then may support ongoing development of new initiatives to support the whole student.

At the University of Otago some years ago we made an effort to use multiple regression approaches (both linear and binary logistic regressions) to consider

the impact of a first-year intervention on students' first-year academic achievement, first-year retention and also degree completion. We used variables from different levels to find out what predicted the outcomes (van der Meer et al., 2017). The intervention we studied was the Peer Assisted Study Sessions programme (PASS). In this programme second or third year undergraduate students facilitate study sessions focused on supporting first-year students to develop study skills, problem solving and working together with other students. The sessions are linked to particular courses so that students can learn these skills in a relevant context for them. But the focus is absolutely not on re-teaching content. This programme is based on the US programme called Supplemental Instruction (SI) which was developed in the 1970s with a particular focus on supporting the minority group of African American students who finally were allowed to enter universities as a positive result of the civil rights movement. A lot of research has been done since to study the effectiveness, including a systematic review of world-wide research (see e.g. Dawson et al., 2014). SI was introduced in other countries as a result of the increased massification and related diversity of students. The name PASS, rather than SI, is used in most countries other than the US.

Drawing on the effectiveness of PASS/SI research (Dawson et al., 2014) we moved at Otago away from just testing whether involvement in the PASS programme had positive benefits or not, even when controlling for other variables. Instead we included a "dose-response" approach. This concept based on medical studies, means that we included the number of PASS sessions students attended to find out whether the number of PASS sessions attended related to better outcomes. We also controlled for many other contextual factors, for example students' socio-economic background (which in New Zealand is partly measured by the decile rating of secondary schools students attended). So the many variables related to the different research levels, micro level (student characteristics), meso level (university based student support intervention) and macro level (socio-economic context).

The results demonstrated that PASS participation indeed positively impacted on students' first-year academic achievement, first-year retention, and degree completion (within 6 years), and that the number of PASS sessions attended predicted the level of positive outcomes. And the data also demonstrated that PASS participation does contribute to students' success over and above their academic ability at their point of entry as measured by their secondary school last year results (NCEA level 3 weighted score). One of the main reasons that participation likely did not just support their level of achievement in the first-year courses to which their PASS programme was related, but also contributed to retention and especially degree completion, is that a great focus of the programme is to help first-year students develop a range of academic skills and connectedness with other students. In other words it actively supports academic and social integration which lots of research indicate is of key importance to student success (see

e.g. Braxton et al., 2000; Grillo & Leist, 2013; Terrion & Daoust, 2011; Tinto, 2006).

As it had been suggested in Otago university by some academics that it was likely that high school high achievers were more likely to participate in this programme, we also tested this. Interestingly students' academic achievement as measured by their secondary school last year results did not predict students' level of participation in the PASS programme.

We also did separate regression analyses for three equity groups within the university, Māori, Pacific Island and students who did not live in a residential college (at Otago nearly three quarters of first-year students live in residential colleges which often provide academic and pastoral care support). Interestingly the effect of participation of these groups was better compared with the results of the overall student population. This further confirmed research in the past on the benefits of this peer learning focused programme for the equity groups of Māori and Pacific Island students (van der Meer & Scott, 2013).

The following diagram gives a broad overview of this important multi-level multiple regression longitudinal study of what can support first-year students transition (Figure 3).
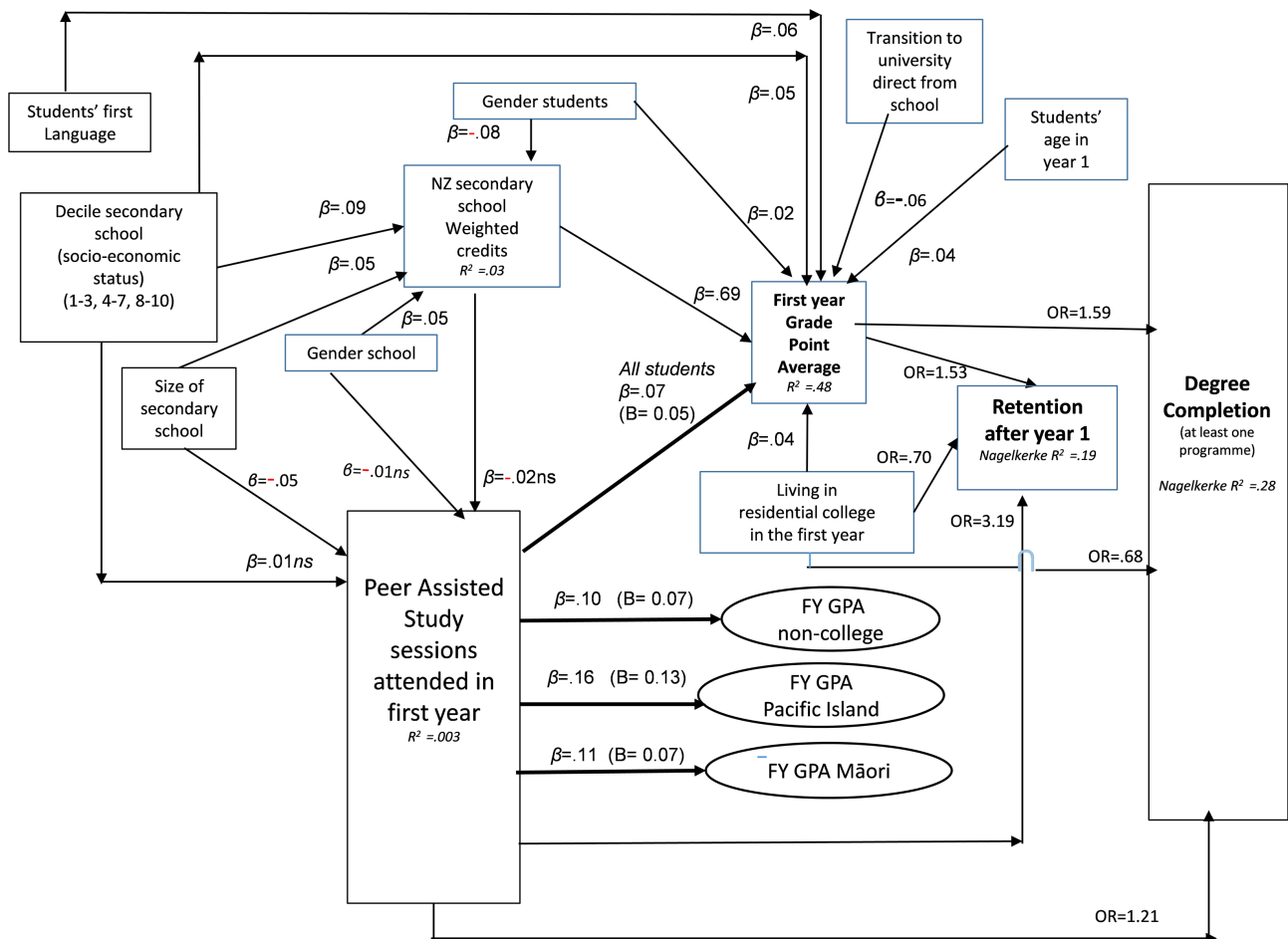

Figure 3. Summary of multi regression results of the impact of PASS sessions attended.

Researchers in our university have also been involved in studying the graduate outcomes of New Zealand university students, and have also particularly focused on diversity and equity groups (Theodore et al., 2018a). They argued that monitoring graduate outcomes is a good way to provide evidence of how to enhance the graduate outcomes of disadvantaged groups, for example with regards to policies at macro level and teaching practices at meso level. And they clearly identified that with regards to what would be beneficial for student outcomes: "within higher education, focusing on successful transitions from school to tertiary education via culturally relevant and appropriate engagement is considered important" (Theodore et al., 2018a: 218). They also focused in other research on what hinders or supports students positive graduate outcomes. In a particular focus on Pacific students they identified for example that both physical and mental health particularly hindered this group (Theodore et al., 2018b).

Longitudinal research can be really useful to identify what contributes to students' success. The well-known longitudinal "Dunedin Study" conducted by our university, which follows close to 1000 people throughout their lifetime for example identified the importance of connectedness in both social and educational contexts. In their 2013 report they clearly identified that research participants (who were in their late 30 s then) who had developed good connectedness had a greater sense of wellbeing and academic achievement (Olsson et al., 2013). This confirms again the importance of interventions for first-year students that support connectedness as well as academic achievement, such as the co-curricular Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) programme discussed above.

10. Conclusion

Considering what has been discussed in this article, it can be argued that higher education institutions should ideally focus more on the broader perspective of how to support the diversity of students transitioning in their first year in higher education. The focus of universities should be to develop the "whole student" in order to support students' overall wellbeing both for their time at university and beyond. Considering the universal increase of mental health issues of higher education students over the last decade or so, the major current and future challenging contexts for the younger generations, and the rapidly changing work environment, this is of considerable importance. This is especially important if universities consider they have a definite responsibility to contribute to their current and future local and global societies.

Developing the whole student also contributes to the United Nations objective of Sustainable Development Goals. That is to ensure that: "all learners, by 2030, acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development" (cited in Sala et al., 2020:

13). To achieve these goals, it is important to promote well-being, provide inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning skills and opportunities (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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