

# The Importance of Supporting Students' Sense of Meaning and Purpose as Part of Supporting the "Whole Student"

Jacques van der Meer, Richard Egan, Hugh Morrison Keryn Pratt

University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Email: [jacques.vandermeer@otago.ac.nz](mailto:jacques.vandermeer@otago.ac.nz)

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## Abstract

The data that informed this paper was from a pilot project in a New Zealand university exploring first-year students' thoughts and perceptions related to different aspects of spirituality (Wright, 2019). This project drew in particular on research into student spirituality conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) among more than 100,000 college students in the USA between 2004 and 2007. The Otago project employed a survey instrument based on the HERI one, modified in a minor way (some linguistic changes to suit the NZ context). In addition to the HERI format, a number of open-ended questions were added to the survey to add some richness and depth to the quantitative questions. This paper will address the question of what the survey respondents' perceptions and experiences were with particular regard to the interests in their sense of meaning and purpose in life. Also, the question will be addressed of what universities could do to focus more on the "whole student", especially during the first year and enhance their holistic sense of wellbeing.

## Keywords

Spirituality, Meaning, Purpose, Wellbeing, "Whole Student"

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## 1. Introduction

There are quite a few different ways to describe "university whole student development". I propose that this could be described comprehensively as:

Whole student development could be understood as contributing to the development of students' identity, appreciation of diversity, and overall

well-being capacities, including their intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual capacities, with the aim to contribute to their academic success, employability, civic-mindedness and a positive resilient holistic wellbeing future, not only during their time at higher education, but also beyond.

However, in supporting first-year students' transition, not all universities tend to focus on the "whole student" and their overall wellbeing in the first year, but more often on the development of academic skills only.

The majority of students entering university are in a crucial developmental stage of their lives. Most first-year students start university at an age when they are transitioning from late adolescence to emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This means that they engage, consciously or subconsciously, in the development of their sense of identity and their sense of meaning and purpose in life. It could be argued that universities therefore should focus more on the "whole student" (van der Meer, 2021; 2022). Jayawickreme et al. (2016) in the context of education suggest 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: p. 481).

The general concept of "spiritual development" has been explored for some time. Love and Talbot's (1999) definition is one of most quoted definitions of spiritual development in the student affairs literature, and includes: "spiritual development involves deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one's life" (p. 367). One succinct definition of purpose in life is from Greenway (2006): "Purpose in life is an awareness of meaningfulness in life that includes an understanding of having personal value and a contribution to make in life" (p. 2). Nash and Jang (2013) argued that today's students are particularly interested in questions of meaning and purpose:

Today's college students are asking their own existential questions of meaning. As Viktor Frankl suggested, many students might have the "means to live," but what they are in search of is a "meaning to live for". Their questions are timeless and yet reflect the age in which they live. These questions are a fascinating admixture of the abstract and the practical, the universal and the particular. They represent the tensions that exist for so many college students who seek to find the delicate balance that exists in the difficult space between idealism and realism; between macro and micro-meaning (p. 3).

Research in the USA started some time ago to explore the forms and patterns of students' spirituality. The landmark longitudinal study by the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) examined what university students thought of spirituality, its role in their lives, and how they perceived spirituality with respect to their higher education experience (Higher Education Research Institute, HERI, 2005). Their study of 112,232

first year students attending 236 colleges and universities over a five-year period explored how students' opinions about spirituality related to differences in their physical and psychological well-being, psychological development, socio-political attitudes, and religious preferences. The results revealed that students had a high level of interest in spirituality, were actively engaged in spiritual pursuits, and had high expectations that higher education would contribute to their spiritual and intellectual development.

Astin et al. (2011b), who were involved with the HERI study on university students' spirituality upon which this study is based, wrote a book called "Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives" that reported on and discussed the findings of their project. They argued that spirituality within the context of the students' development during their university years has to do with "the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to one another and to the world around us" (Astin et al., 2011b: p. 4).

In their longitudinal study they discovered that students' spiritual growth during their university years was considerable and that spiritual growth can enhance their university outcomes, both academic performance and their psychological well-being and satisfaction with university. One example mentioned were experiences that enhanced students' exposure to new and diverse people, cultures and ideas. Another example was experiences where students had been encouraged to explore "big questions" of meaning and purpose by their teachers, and engage in activities of self-reflection. Mining data from this study and other rich survey data sources, Dalton et al. (2006) reiterated the importance of the spiritual "quest" or "inward journey" pursued by USA university students today. The main "big questions" they highlighted (based on Parks, 2000, work) were: 1) *Identity*: Who am I?; 2) *Destiny or Calling*: Where am I going?; 3) *Personal Faith*: What can I believe in?; 4) *Wholeness*: How can I be happy?; and 5) *Mattering*: Will my life make a difference?

It could be argued that spirituality has gained interest in the context of higher education because of the growing concern about the well-being of students, including a rise of mental health issues and suicide rates. Mental health issues and suicide rates, especially in the adolescent/young adult group, have been rising in most Western countries (see e.g. Brown, 2016; Kitzrow, 2003; Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, & Martin, 2018). Research literature of the last ten years or so has highlighted an increase in university students suffering from stress or anxiety (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Kitzrow, 2003; Larcombe et al., 2016; Ryan, Shochet, & Stallman, 2010; Storrie, Ahern, & Tucker, 2010). There are many potential reasons for this unfortunate development. An Australian universities' project group suggests a general increase in complexity of student life: "While it may seem that there is no better time to be a university student, in many ways, student life is more complex and challenging than in past decades. This increases the psycho-

logical stressors that students experience” ([Enhancing Student Well-being Project, n.d.](#)). Others have pointed to societal changes over the last few decades, such as digitalisation ([Twenge et al., 2018](#)), as a contributing factor. Increase of mental health issues is also happening in New Zealand.

Institutions of further and higher education in Australia, Canada, and the UK have started to work together to address these issues (see e.g. [Enhancing Student Well-being Project, n.d.](#); [Universities UK and Mental Well-being in Higher Education Working Group, 2015](#)). Many of the initiatives are focused on enhancing well-being and resilience in students as a preventative approach to mental health issues and suicidal behaviour from occurring or (further) developing. Some of these initiatives are stand-alone courses ([Stallman, 2011](#)), others are embedded in the curriculum and support structures (see e.g. [Houghton & Anderson, 2017](#); [Larcombe, Baik, & Brooker, 2015](#)) and others are a combination of the two.

It is important to emphasise that there is no intention to implicitly seek to pathologise normal life challenges. The focus on building resilience and strategies to well-being reflect an increasing recognition that institutions of higher education have a role in supporting “whole students” in a developmentally important part of their lives ([Dalton, Eberhardt, & Crosby, 2006](#)) and prepare them for managing a complex range of challenges both during and after their time in higher education ([Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016](#); [Mayhew, 2004](#)).

In New Zealand there is an increased interest in the holistic wellbeing of students in all educational sectors, drawing on the indigenous Māori concept of *Hau Ora*, which includes four dimensions, physical, mental/emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing. The spiritual dimension of wellbeing in the educational sectors, however, has received relatively lesser attention than the other dimensions ([Arnst, 2019](#)). The fact that there was less attention on the aspect of spirituality in wellbeing, prompted the original researcher who conducted most of the research reported in this article ([Wright, 2019](#)), to study first-year university students’ concept of spirituality and how this related to wellbeing. This was done by conducting a survey.

The main purpose of this article is to focus on the question in what ways first-year students’ sense of spirituality contributed to their well-being. And then in consequence of this, the question will be addressed of what universities could do to focus more on the “whole student”, especially during the first year and to enhance their sense of meaning and purpose and thereby their holistic sense of wellbeing. The article will draw on the results from the survey [Wright \(2019\)](#) conducted, and will particularly focus on respondents’ sense of meaning and purpose in life as this can be considered as contributing particularly to their overall sense of wellbeing. In a positive way this aspect of spirituality came through quite frequently in the results of the survey.

## 2. Methodology

The survey [Wright \(2019\)](#) conducted drew in large parts upon the survey into

student spirituality developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) among more than 100,000 college students in the USA between 2004 and 2007 (Astin et al., 2011a, 2011b).

One of the university residential colleges was selected for this research project. This particular college was chosen because it was considered to be one of the colleges that reflected reasonably well the overall make-up of the first-year population of the university with regards to a number of factors. These factors include prior academic achievement, ethnicity, and gender. A few other residential colleges were more selective with regards to prior academic achievement.

All first-year students of this college were invited to participate in the survey and all those who responded, 70 students, were included in this article. The large majority of the 70 students who participated in this research (67%) identified as female. This compares with 59 percent females and 41 percent males in that College population. Eighty-three percent of respondents identified as NZ European, six percent as Māori, four percent as Pasifika, and 11 percent as Asian/Middle Eastern. This compares with 81 percent NZ European, five percent Māori, one percent Pasifika, and 11 percent Asian/Middle Eastern in that College population. The majority (87%) of respondents spoke English as their first language.

Frequency analyses were performed for each question in the survey. Because the sample size was relatively small, a full Principal Components Analysis of the New Zealand cohort was not done. Therefore, the factor structure from the HERI study was used to check Cronbach's alpha values (reliability scores) for the scales among the NZ sample. As can be seen in the results section, this showed that items cohered in a similar manner, to a satisfactory extent, for this NZ study.

For each of the four open-ended questions, a thematic analysis approach was used to identify the themes that emerged from the responses. For some questions there were some clear categories. For others there was a wider range of categories. The importance of the themes was mainly determined by the frequency of the responses.

### 3. Results

The following **Table 1** provides an overview of the reliability of some the HERI scales that related mostly to spirituality. As can be seen, the reliability of the scales in the USA HERI and New Zealand data sets are comparable and all reached the 0.70 level which is considered the minimum acceptable level.

The "Spiritual quest" factor included most of the purpose and meaning related questions, e.g. whether they engaged with "Searching for meaning/purpose in life", and whether they have had "discussions about the meaning of life with my friends". The respondents in our survey answered most of these questions in this factor in a positive way.

Concerning the focus of the research with regard to what ways students' sense of spirituality contributed to their well-being, the answers to individual questions

**Table 1.** Scales comparison NZ University and 2004 USA/HERI results.

Scale	Scale Items	Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)	
		USA/HERI	NZ university
Spiritual identification	13	0.88	0.88
Spiritual quest	9	0.83	0.79
Equanimity	5	0.76	0.72
Charitable involvement	7	0.67	0.70
Ethic of caring	8	0.79	0.82
Ecumenical worldview	12	0.72	0.70
Compassionate self-concept	4	0.78	0.77

and the different scales suggested that respondents were definitely interested in areas of spirituality that related to well-being. These areas included the search and interest in questions of purpose and meaning in life, and a desire to feel centred, a sense of peace and connectedness to others and the world.

Some of the survey questions, because they did not load on one of the factors mentioned above, were not included in any of the above reported scales. However, because some of these individual items may still reveal some interesting findings related to the respondents' perceptions of aspects related to a sense of meaning and purpose, which is the focus of this paper, some of these questions will be discussed. For one of these questions, respondents were asked to indicate the importance of some future intentions on a 4-point scale (*essential, very important, somewhat important, not important*). The great majority of respondents seemed to have some intention to improve things in the world (**Table 2**).

There was a clear interest in finding out about purpose and meaning related aspects of life: *Finding answers to the mysteries of life* was considered "essential" for 23 percent of respondents, with a further 29 percent seeing it as "very important". Over 75 percent considered it important to knowing *the purpose in life*, and over 70 percent thought it essential or very important to *discover who I really am*.

For another question, respondents were asked to indicate the importance to them personally of 13 items using a 4-point scale (*essential, very important, somewhat important, not important*). Nearly 70 percent of respondents reported that "Developing a meaningful philosophy in my life" had some importance.

In response to a question related to how they saw themselves, 32.4% percent felt to a great extent and 55.9% felt to some extent "good about the direction in which my life is headed".

Students sense of purpose and meaning is related to them reflecting about themselves and their lives. To examine whether the frequency of reflection was related to some extent with respondents' engagement in a spiritual quest, a correlational analysis was performed between respondents' frequency of self-reflection

**Table 2.** Importance of future intentions.

Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:	Essential	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important
Reducing pain and suffering in the world	14.0%	53.0%	30.0%	3.0%
Attaining inner harmony	21.4%	37.1%	31.4%	10.0%
Attaining wisdom	32.9%	35.7%	24.3%	7.1%
Seeking out opportunities to help me grow spiritually	8.6%	22.9%	45.7%	22.9%
Seeking beauty in my life	15.7%	41.4%	34.3%	8.6%
Finding answers to the mysteries of life	22.9%	28.6%	40.0%	8.6%
Becoming a more loving person	31.4%	42.9%	20.0%	5.7%
Seeking to follow religious teachings in my everyday life	5.7%	4.3%	18.6%	71.4%
Improving the human condition	20.0%	48.6%	27.1%	4.3%
Discovering who I really am	38.6%	31.4%	25.7%	4.3%
Becoming a better person	47.1%	41.4%	11.4%	0.0%
Knowing my purpose in life	31.4%	44.3%	22.9%	1.4%
Making the world a better place	27.1%	51.4%	20.0%	1.4%

(six-point scale) and the spiritual quest score. This did indeed show a significant positive correlation,  $r = 0.403$ ,  $p = 0.001$ .

Respondents were asked to engage with four open-ended questions at the end of the survey. With regards to the first question, which is relevant to the focus of this article: “What does ‘spirituality’ and/or ‘religion’ mean to you?”, four main themes were identified in response to this question: 1) belief(s), 2) finding meaning and purpose, 3) relationships, and 4) values, conduct, and affect. Approximately one in five respondents (19%) made reference to spirituality and/or religion having to do with finding or providing meaning and purpose in life. For example:

- Spirituality means for me to understand who I am as a person, my morals and beliefs and purpose in life.
- Purpose, inner peace.
- It means the choice/chance to be able to find your meaning and purpose in life, allows you to find something that shapes you as a person in your morals, attitude and actions. To me, myself it means the ability to express and learn how to be a good person.
- The greatest thing of all that gives me the purpose of life. It is love. Guidance.
- Finding something you believe in which helps you understand life decisions.

#### 4. Discussion

Concerning the purpose of the article in what ways research participants’ sense

of spirituality contributed to their well-being, both answers to individual questions and the different scales suggested that respondents were definitely interested in areas of spirituality that relate to well-being. The areas that particularly came through were the search for and interest in questions of purpose and meaning in life. However, some other key facets of spirituality that are considered to play a role in well-being came also through in this research. These facets included equanimity, their sense of values, their connectedness with the world and other people, and feeling centred.

Meaning, purpose and values are cognitive functions that can be underpinned by the spiritual component of personal identity, such as answering the deep question of “Who am I?”. The importance of purpose in life came through in individual survey items, composite factors, and responses to open-ended questions. Many respondents considered it important to know the purpose in their life, and thought it essential or very important to discover who they really were.

Nash and Jang (2013) argued that today’s society needs to do more to support students with their sense of purpose and deal with complexity and ambiguity of the world and the “big questions” of life. In their article they made a case for a central campus “meaning making centre” that would be in charge of meaning-making curriculum that would be interdisciplinary in design and based on what they call a *crossover-pedagogy* approach. By this they mean that various parts of the university, including student services and academic departments, should work together in delivering this curriculum.

Active learning activities may prompt thinking about purpose and meaning in life through class discussions, interaction in group work with other students, and other learning activities that engage students’ thinking about the “big questions” in life. It is likely that these activities may lead to reflections that then may prompt positive emotions or at times some uncertainty, stress and/or anxiety. The extant literature provides clear support for the at times complex relationships between these aspects, and the issues related to it. One of the scholars who has focused much of her work on spirituality, Zohar (2010), made the point that it is unfortunate, however, that “many professors are not trained to handle students’ ‘big questions’ and, as a result, students learn that asking questions that don’t have easy answers can become a liability in their education” (Zohar, 2010: p. 6). Similar to Nash and Jang (2013, 2014), Park and Millora (2012) advocated for greater collaboration between academic departments and student affairs to support students so that students can reap the benefits of reflection.

These issues, then, can raise questions about the dynamics related to reflection and whether many students who engage in reflection experience negative psychological well-being? Stein and Grant (2014) tried to disentangle the confusing relationship between self-reflection, psychological well-being, and some other facets. The results from many studies, they said, have been often equivocal and sometimes counter-intuitive. In their study, therefore, they explored the possible impact of students’ pre-existing dysfunctional attitudes. These, they said, are

“negatively biased assumptions and beliefs regarding oneself, the world and the future” (Stein & Grant, 2014: p. 508). They hypothesised that “(...) when statistically controlling for dysfunctional attitudes, self-reflection is related to insight, and insight is in turn related to positive core self-evaluations, which then in turn influences subjective well-being” (p. 506). Their findings, that positive well-being was not a direct result of the process of reflection, but results from positive self-evaluation which was informed by positive self-insight, which in turn results from the actual process of positive self-reflection (i.e., if not negatively influenced by dysfunctional attitudes), was an important result. This may mean that we need to consider what we can do to positively influence a reduction of students’ dysfunctional attitudes.

As a result of the HERI project, those involved in the research organised a number of retreats to discuss the results and implications of the results for institutions of higher education.

They recognised that there is a hesitation in many institutions of higher education to get involved in any aspect of spirituality because they assume it may be associated with religion. They discussed how it may be important to clearly link spirituality to purpose and meaning.

The HERI study has made quite an impact on institutions of higher education in the USA and led to a further initiative to inventorise the range of interventions and initiatives that were undertaken by the various institutions. This resulted in a document called “*Promising practices for facilitating college/university students’ faith/spiritual development*” (Lindholm et al., 2011). Some of the suggested interventions in this document, are also included in the following recommendations of some possible interventions we suggest that may support students’ development of purpose and meaning.

**Recommendations to better support the whole student development with more focus on purpose and meaning, and thereby their overall wellbeing.**

In this recommendations section we will also report on how in a pilot transition programme in our university we have been including activities to include many of these recommendations.

We suggest that academic and support staff to enhance first-year students’ sense of purpose and meaning encourage and support students to:

- consider some of the “big questions” of life in some of their reflective writing or thinking;
- engage in discussions about some of the “big questions” of life in classrooms;
- develop their self-awareness & identity development;
- develop goal setting skills, and encourage them the setting of and pursuing of goals;
- to connect purpose and meaning with academic work or extra-curricular activities;
- search for ways to find meaning and purpose within their chosen courses and/or field of study and related possible future career choices;

- engage in mentoring opportunities with other students and/or staff;
- develop self-reflection skills and provide opportunities to do this regularly, and also support students to deal with potential dysfunctional attitudes when doing this.
- explore their purpose and meaning through a (co)curricular transition course when such a course is available.

Some of these suggested interventions will be elaborated in the following paragraph.

With regards to “Big life” questions Nash and Jang (2013) suggested a list of key questions are related to purpose and meaning. These include: What am I?; Why am I?; Where am I going?; What is my vocation?; What should I believe, hope for, and trust in? (Nash, 2013: p. 4)

With regards to students developing their self-awareness and identity, there are many different ways to do this. In the pilot transition programme in our university we got students engaged in a number of activities related to this. This included a focus on their narrative identity, by getting them to reflect on some of their past and current positive experiences. For example, they were prompted to reflect on experiences of overcoming learning challenges in the past. We also got them to do a number of questionnaires throughout the course that helped them to become more aware of themselves and also their learning approaches, for example an awareness of their mindset, different aspect of their identity, collaborative values and skills, and metacognitive abilities. Awareness of others can be developed by getting students to engage much to collaborate with other students and develop their skills in collaborating with others.

In the pilot transition programme we also got students to develop their awareness of their strengths. The nascence of the academic discipline of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) has seen an increased interest in psychological and educational interventions based on strengths-based approaches and identifying key elements of psychological well-being. One particular strengths-based instrument that has been widely used is the Values in Action (VIA) instrument (Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). This one was used in our transition programme. This instrument is aimed at identifying key values and signature strengths. Signature strengths are:

those strengths that an individual considers to be very much their own. These strengths convey a sense of ownership and authenticity in their use, an intrinsic yearning to use them and a feeling of inevitability in doing so. Hence, using one’s signature strengths is considered to be concordant with one’s intrinsic interests and values. In addition, using one’s signature strengths is considered to serve well-being and basic psychological needs, such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Linley et al., 2010: p. 8).

Using character strengths can also be related to developing goal setting skills. Linley et al. (2010) undertook a project amongst university students to identify

the relationship between students using their signature strengths, making progress and their sense of well-being. Their analyses revealed that:

strengths use was associated with goal progress, which in turn was associated with both need satisfaction and well-being at both six weeks and 10 weeks post-baseline. When we modelled the data to examine the relative and absolute fit of the data we found that strengths use affects well-being both through goal progress and through the psychological need fulfilment associated with goal progress. That is, to the extent that individuals make progress toward personally relevant goals and to the extent that this goal progress feels concordant with self-growth and autonomy, people will predictably feel more positive affect, less negative affect, and greater life satisfaction (Linley et al., 2010: p. 13).

Goal setting skills are really important for students' future-related intentions, but can also support students in maintaining their hope. Meaning and purpose in life are closely related to "hope". As Acosta (2017) argued: "Students arrive on campus full of hope about what their collegiate experience will be like, what they will learn in and out of the classroom, the life-long relationships they will form, and the lessons they will take with them after college" (p. 306). The close relationship between hope and goal setting was developed through the research by Snyder (1995). He defined hope as "the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals (agency) and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)" (p. 355). Contrary to what some may think, different studies have shown that hope is malleable (Davidson, Feldman, & Margalit, 2012; Feldman & Dreher, 2012). The researchers of these studies reported that students in these studies were supported to develop goals, explore pathways to achieve those goals, and envision future success. These three elements of support produced feelings of hope. With regards to goals, it is important that students develop a clear understanding of what they want to achieve in the short, medium, and long term, to identify possible barriers and how to overcome these. In thinking about overcoming barriers students could consider using some of their signature/character strengths. In the transition programme we taught students how to develop these skills by using a conceptual format called a "goal rocket" (partly based on the design by Dansereau, 2005).

With regards to the role extra-curricular involvement and a sense of meaning and purpose, the results of the HERI study made it clear that overall spiritual development can be greatly helped by providing students with opportunities to engage in leadership development and service-learning type activities, such as involvement in community activities and volunteering. Getting involved in these activities can give them a sense of purpose and meaning in contributing to society and others' wellbeing.

All of the previous interventions have a greater sense of positive development if students are encouraged to self-reflect on all of this. To do this, it would be good to help students to develop their self-reflection skills, and then encourage

them to do this regularly. One way to support them to develop their skills is to provide initially some reflection prompts. In the pilot transition programme, we got students to reflect each day on their learning that day. There were three key areas for which we provided prompts:

1) Topic related reflection prompts. Some examples from this: *What did you find most useful or relevant about today's topic(s), both for your study at university and/or your personal development and/or your potential future career development. What surprised you, and what questions came up for you with regards to the topic(s)?* 2) Engagement related reflection prompts. Some examples from this: *How engaged (or distanced) did you feel today during the class activities? If you did not feel too engaged, what can you learn from this for the future so you can become more engaged?* 3) Mindset related reflection prompts. Some examples from this: *Were there any times today that you thought that you just can't do something and that is it? Rather than: "I can't do it YET, but I can learn it". Were there any times today that you thought "I am unfortunately a certain kind of person and I can't change myself?" Rather than thinking, "I am not the kind of person I want to be YET, but I can start making changes to what kind of person I am".*

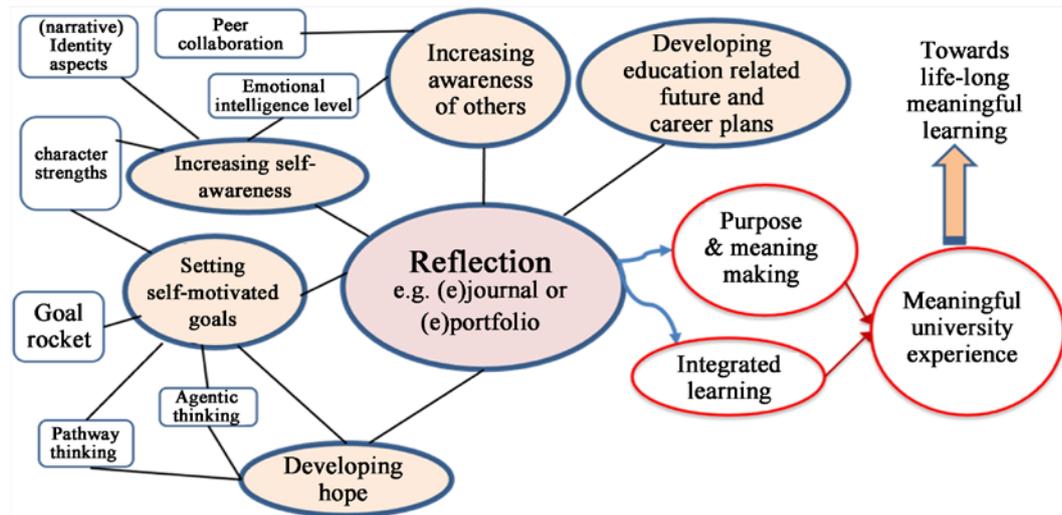
Self-reflection can be encouraged and supported by possibly getting students to maintain a (e)journal, and/or provide them with an e-portfolio in which they maintain reflections and artefacts related to their learning. Buyarski et al. (2015) in their universities got their students to use an e-portfolio and considered this to be great for students' reflection:

Reflection acts as the primary pedagogical tool to facilitate learning and development within and among the four domains. These four domains build a foundation upon which students begin to develop a sense of life-purpose and meaning-making through integration of the sometimes disparate components of college experiences both inside and outside the classroom (Buyarski et al., 2015: p. 285).

The four domains they mention were: increasing awareness of self and others, setting self-concordant goals, developing hope, and shaping education and career plans. All these reflect the previous mentioned interventions to support meaning and purpose. The following diagram brings together the conceptual thinking of Buyarski et al. (2015) and some of the suggested interventions discussed in this section.

As discussed earlier, self-reflection may result in negative emotions. It is important therefore to also students help students to self-identify any dysfunctional attitudes, such as negative self-talk/thinking (cognitive distortions). In our pilot transition programme we helped students to develop their positive self-talk/thinking (cognitive restructuring skills). This approach drew on the learning from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and Positive Psychology.

Lastly, ideally all first-year students would have an opportunity to engage in a (co)curricular course that would throughout it embed the suggested interventions



**Figure 1.** Suggested interventions.

and thereby help develop students' sense of purpose and meaning in an overall way. The mentioned transition programme pilot at our university, aimed at two minority groups, has indeed done this. Ideally, this pilot will be further developed in the future so it can benefit all first-year students.

## 5. Conclusion

In concluding, the findings of this study reflect the extensive research of practitioners and researchers who subscribe to the world-wide “Positive Psychology” trend in psychology. The PERMA model developed by positive psychologists for example includes the importance of relatedness (“R”) and meaning (“M”). Positive psychologists have also developed “Positive Education” interventions, which are very relevant to the findings of our research. Higher Education institutions may all benefit from a focus on “Positive Education” to enhance the overall wellbeing and the “whole student”, especially by supporting them in developing their sense of purpose and meaning (van der Meer, 2021; 2022).

In our university, we have developed an overall on-line transition programme based on the pilot transition programme (mentioned above in the recommendation section) that will be introduced in 2023 to all first-year students.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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