**What’s so positive about Positive Psychology in an enabling program?**

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Abstract

Enabling courses focus on developing study skills and applicable knowledge to assist students with their transition to university. Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) offers a unique unit of study which introduces students to Positive Psychology as a means of developing the resilience required on the student learning journey. This 12-week unit, Positive Learning for University (PLU), takes students on a personal and academic journey where they learn about the theories that underpin Positive Psychology and strategies to apply the associated concepts to their role as students. In doing this, it is hoped that students will attain valuable transferable skills and that they will experience significant improvement in their mental health, well-being and self-efficacy. PLU was introduced to the STEPS curriculum in 2012 when the course underwent a substantial remodel based on an institutional review. It is one of twelve units that students can elect as part of their STEPS study plan. Since its inception, PLU has been continually modified to maintain currency and to align with the latest research within the field of Positive Psychology. This paper outlines the evolving nature of the unit and considers how student evaluations, lecturers’ reflections, available resources and funding have shaped the currently offered unit.

# **Introduction**

Focusing on how to assist individuals to prosper and lead healthy, happy lives through changed mindsets, Positive Psychology is recognised as one of the newest branches of psychology to emerge. Positive Psychology aims to develop a person’s strengths, capacity and virtues rather than solely focusing on weak areas (Linley, Joseph, Harrington & Wood, 2006). The Positive Learning for University (PLU) unit within the STEPS enabling course aims to achieve positive outcomes for each student, evidenced in their approach to study, and further afield when applied to their personal lives. The unit considers proactive solutions and strategies, which challenge the mould of the ‘victim’ paradigm and guide students with examples, strategies and concepts that can be embraced in order to make their learning journey more meaningful. This unit is offered to enabling students, many of whom are quite diverse in nature, enter STEPS with disparate levels of education having experienced negative educational experiences, and possess low levels of confidence in their ability to engage successfully in further study (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). Since its inception, PLU has undergone enhancements to ensure the unit is fulfilling the needs of the student cohort, alongside the requirements of the STEPS course. Guided by student evaluations, this paper will document the changes to unit construction and delivery that have occurred and the role that the student voice has had in directing these changes.

# **Context**

In 2011, Emeritus Professor Bruce King was commissioned by CQUniversity to review the enabling programs on offer. King’s recommendation was for CQUniversity to streamline the existing enabling programs into one single enabling program. The STEPS course retained the name due to its long history with CQUniversity and the high level of recognition it has with students and the community, and was used as the basis for the design and delivery of the new single enabling program that commenced in 2012. To enact the required changes, all units within the program were reviewed and changes made in line with the recommendations from the review. The existing unit, Tertiary Preparation for Studies Extended (TPSE), was re-conceptualised, re-written and re-named Positive Learning for University (PLU) to reflect its focus on Positive Psychology as a basis for instruction. Originally, TPSE was informed by a workshop called Getting Optimistic about Study and introduced students to the tenets of optimism and positive study skills in the first portion of the term. This was well received by students, with strong positive feedback speaking to the benefits of developing a more optimistic mindset. The remainder of the term focused on individual oral presentations. Through discussions with other key unit coordinators, the decision was made that the oral presentation component would be better situated in the core unit Preparation Skills for University and, therefore, would be written out of PLU. The key focus for the re-write of the unit was to be on the tenets of optimism and positive psychology.

When developing this unit and reviewing the range of courses and units that teach Positive Psychology within Australia, the opportunities were very limited. Over recent years, there have been more options available such as the Diploma of Positive Psychology (Langley, 2014), Professional Certificate (Melbourne University), Master in Applied Positive Psychology (Melbourne University) and a Graduate Certificate in Positive Psychology (CQUniversity, 2018), with a number of university courses Australia-wide offering specialised units in Positive Psychology. Within the enabling arena, this unit is unique to STEPS and is offered as an elective unit as PLU is not a pre-requisite for entry to CQUniversity undergraduate courses and, thus, the implication for this unit is that it attracts limited enrolments each term of offer.

PLU is not based on developing an academic skill set for university, but rather focuses more on developing strategies to develop an optimistic mindset with transferable skills to improve students’ mental health, well-being and self-efficacy. The unit introduces students to a variety of self-enhancement concepts through the framework of Positive Psychology and is underpinned by the CHOOSE Happiness Model proposed by Dr Timothy Sharp (2007). CHOOSE is a philosophy that Sharp believes enables people to take responsibility for their daily decisions to aid in more positive outcomes. CHOOSE is a mnemonic for six key strategies: clarity, health, optimism, others, strengths and enjoy (2007). Linley, Joseph, Harrington and Wood (2006, p. 8) define positive psychology as “[T]he scientific study of optimal human functioning… at the pragmatic level, it is about understanding the wellsprings, processes and mechanisms that lead to desirable outcomes.” For a unit of study whose key stakeholders are students entering an enabling course in order to access university, the underlying vision is to identify how the curriculum could tap into this branch of psychology. It encourages students to consider their personal weaknesses and flaws and consider factors such as their strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004); health psychology and the link between holistic health and optimism (Sharp, 2009); positive thinking to develop optimism (Seligman, 1992); nurturing positive relationships (Chapman, 2010); and positive meaning and living with purpose (Wong, 2013). Through Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden and build theory, students are able to see how positive emotions can lead to survival through broadening thought-action repertoires and building enduring personal resources.

# **Research design: Methodology, process, data analysis**

Using an explanatory-exploratory case study (Yin, 1994; Yin, 2013), the focus of the research was to consider the issues that were fundamental to the development of PLU through the process of change. The research question that underpins this paper was ‘How did the student voice guide curriculum change within Positive Learning for University?’ The focus of the paper will be on the approach used to deliver the unit content and the evolving nature of the positive psychology content. The participant group for this research were students enrolled in PLU from Term 3, 2012 through to Term 2, 2017 (see Table 1). A total of 613 students were enrolled across this span, with a total of 340 students responding to the Unit Evaluations. Student satisfaction in the unit has been consistently high with quantitative data sourced from unit evaluations from 2012 through to 2017 reflecting an overall satisfaction score of 4.4/5 (n=340) (CQUniversity Dashboard, 2017).

Table 1

Unit Evaluation response rates and satisfaction scores

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Term** | **Total Students** | **Response Rate** | **Total response rate** | **Overall Satisfaction** |
| **Term 3, 2012** | 70 | 57% | 40 | 4.6 |
| **Term 1, 2013** | 34 | 59% | 20 | 4.5 |
| **Term 2, 2013** | 57 | 51% | 29 | 4.1 |
| **Term 3, 2013** | 50 | 50% | 25 | 4.2 |
| **Term 1, 2014** | 34 | 58% | 20 | 4.3 |
| **Term 2, 2014** | 40 | 54% | 21 | 4.1 |
| **Term 3, 2014** | 48 | 60% | 29 | 4.6 |
| **Term 1, 2015** | 22 | 76% | 17 | 4.2 |
| **Term 2, 2015** | 38 | 52% | 20 | 4.4 |
| **Term 3, 2015** | 48 | 51% | 24 | 4.4 |
| **Term 1, 2016** | 22 | 44% | 10 | 4.5 |
| **Term 2, 2016** | 50 | 49% | 25 | 4.1 |
| **Term 3, 2016** | 60 | 54% | 32 | 4.3 |
| **Term 1, 2017** | 16 | 87% | 14 | 4.5 |
| **Term 2, 2017** | 24 | 59% | 14 | 4.5 |
| Total | 613 | 861% | 340 | 65.3 |
| Average | 40 | 57% | 22 | 4.4 |

Ethical clearance provided approval to access unit evaluations that students complete at the end of each academic term. There are two open ended questions that the students anonymously respond to:

1. What are the best aspects of your unit?

2. What aspects of your unit are most in need of improvement?

The responses were coded to collate similar thoughts and trends and then themes were identified. The themes covered in this paper include the delivery of content and the students’ positive and negative thoughts on unit content. The themes were then collated into an Excel document for the final stage of analysis, where relatable data were sorted and analysed. As this review considers the changes to the unit over a period of time, a time-series analysis was used; however, there are multiple points of change that are not clearly dictated by dates, so the continuum of change was not fluid, but can be categorised into three stages. Stage 1 outlines the initial offering and is termed the Innovative stage (IS); the second stage, the Enhancement Stage (ES) outlines the changes made after the first trial period; and the final stage, the Refinement Stage (RS) discusses the final changes which resulted in the current offering construct. Each of these three stages are considered across two aspects of the PLU offering: the delivery of the unit and the Positive Psychology content of the unit.

# **Findings**

# *Delivery of the unit*

## *Innovative stage (IS)*

The presentation of unit content through Moodle, CQUniversity’s learning platform of choice, allows for an element of uniqueness for each unit presented with common features to ensure students can transition easily between terms. The initial unit design in Moodle has seen only minor changes over time. Each week’s module block is presented in the same format, and once students understand the layout, they can easily navigate the unit content: *All the required material was easy to find on Moodle [Unit Evaluation (UE), 2012]; The layout and the material was so easy to understand and find (UE, 2013).*

There were, however, some comments indicating frustration with Moodle: *I didn’t like how reliant on Moodle everything was (UE, 2012).* Some students identified problems with links within Moodle not working and this required lecturers to complete a thorough check prior to commencement of term: *There were a few links that were no longer available (UE, 2013); I found it to be confusing as the same documents were repeated in different sections of the site and some documents that I did not find to be relevant (UE, 2013).*

For the initial offering, a multi-mode approach was trialled for both internal and online students. Internal students could attend a one hour Interactive Systems-Wide Learning (ISL) lecture, either on campus or via the videoconferencing facility. These lectures were recorded and posted to Moodle in weekly module blocks to allow online students access. However, although the ISL technology allowed for multi-campus access, there were issues in relation to the reliability of delivery as there were constant problems with technology malfunctioning, with student feedback noting issues with accessing the link: *The links to lecture videos were sometimes wrong. For some modules, the link directed students back to a lecture from last term; It was frustrating downloading the wrong lecture first (UE, 2012); In addition, a number of the Module lectures didn’t work properly and kept freezing and restarting every 5 mins which was highly frustrating and ultimately turned me off of watching the lectures (UE, 2013).* Moreover, student feedback sought more classroom time but this was unable to be offered due to the low number of enrolments across multiple campus locations: *I personally would like to see this set in a classroom environment rather than an ISL lesson (UE, 2012).*

To combat low contact hours, online chats were hosted through Moodle. Students’ reflections were positive about the chats that were offered: *Chats were beneficial as well as enjoyable (UE, 2012); The Moodle sites and weekly chats were wonderful and something that should be included in all distance classes (UE, 2013); I found the hour meeting on a Wednesday made me feel motivated to jump onto Moodle (UE, 2014).* There were only a couple of comments in relation to scheduled chat times being unsuitable: *The chat sessions were run at times inconvenient to students with families ( UE 2012); It would have been great to have had access to the chat sessions more…it was my fault as my working time schedule was very tight during the sessions (UE, 2012).* Students were asked to respond weekly on the Moodle forums in order to share their understanding of the content and to develop the sense of an online supportive community. Some students valued the forums, stating that: *The best aspect was posting your answers on Moodle forum weekly. This helped me understand and also give my views on each subject (UE, 2013); The online discussions were a new experience for me. (I was hesitant to start with) and as a distance student I did find that these discussions connected me and made me feel like part of the university campus (UE, 2014)*

# *Enhancement stage (ES)*

Due to limited enabling funding, the next stage in the unit evolution saw the decision made to only offer PLU as a fully online course. The main determinant was the low number of enrolments and the increasing number of campus locations that had to be serviced. A new approach was required to ensure that all students were receiving the material in a consistent manner, through a fully online mode where students could work at their own pace within the time structures allocated to assessment pieces: *I feel the best aspect of the unit was the free time frame we were given to work in. This kind of subject works better when taught freely and not in a traditional “high school” sense (UE, 2015); The layout of Moodle and the unit structure are amazing. It was extremely easy to find everything (UE, 2016); The best aspects of this unit are the weekly modules.*

The PLU study guide is not presented in a hard copy but rather as weekly modules located under the weekly module blocks in Moodle. Feedback indicated the majority of students appreciated the way they could click on the relevant module and open the content for that week: *The fact that we have the study guide and then the tasks to do reinforces what we just learned that week (UE, 2014).* A small number of students requested a hard copy: *Please give the option of a printed study guide* (UE, 2015), but with the cost involved in printing the Study Guide, and the number of students enrolled overall in all STEPS units as a fee-free course, it is not a viable option, especially when students can easily print each module quite cheaply. In addition, when a majority of student feedback in unit evaluations is positive, then the decision to not make changes is justified: *Everything is set up in such a convenient format, that it is hard to think of improvements (UE, 2015*).

Due to the number of previous issues in relation to the weekly lectures, and taking into account the negative research findings around student attentiveness to long lectures (Wilson & Korn, 2007) a different approach using video production was planned. An internal grant facilitated the development of a series of Snapshots (short 5-minute videos) featuring ‘experts’ in the content area. These videos were recorded and located in the online weekly module blocks. For each new concept being taught, a snapshot provided students the opportunity to gain deeper knowledge by listening to an expert and hearing personalised stories: *I really enjoyed how [lecturer] used SnapShots and broke up the monotony of a traditional lecture. I could take notes from the study guide, then watch a SnapShot. I really believe it maximized my learning capacity (UE, 2016);* *The Snapshot videos are very helpful as the information stays in memory for longer after both reading and watching through the modules (UE, 2016).* These SnapShots were uploaded through a new video playback system, Echo360 and a link placed within the online study modules, with the justification being that when the students click the link adjacent to the content being introduced and watch the SnapShots, it ensures that the brain’s receptors are linking what is read to a visual and verbal representation: *You could watch the videos or you could use the study guide, therefore suiting all learning styles (UE, 2016).*

### *Refinement stage (RS)*

On the back of an internal focus by all lecturers to ensure students are engaged within the first few weeks of term, each STEPS unit has adopted its own way of communicating and encouraging enrolled students. In PLU, Moodle’s EASICONNECT system assists with tracking student activity. Communication is valued by the PLU teaching team and highly consistent throughout the term with a weekly ‘Monday Morning Mentor’ email sent to all students, plus additional emails as required depending on assessment due dates. More personalised emails are sent at various times throughout the term to encourage students and to track their engagement with the unit. However, even with all of these forms of communication, one student stated: *Maybe better communication between student and teacher to see that the student is up to date and keeping on track (UE, 2016).* This feedback raised the question as to whether the level of communication was in fact high enough, so from this suggestion a specific email was sent in Week 7. This friendly email, with the subject line “Personal check up! Better than a doctor appointment,” was sent to all students asking them how they were tracking and requesting a return email. This email attracted a high proportion of replies with very open and honest responses. One example indicates how the personal contact was instrumental in helping the student feel they were in a caring, supportive environment, even though they were an online student: *I was doing fine, then I was drowning, but then me, myself and I had an argument and I told me and myself to be quiet and harden up. So together we regrouped got our schedule sorted and am now on the right path, but I know you are there if I find myself drowning in the module. Thank you* *(Student email, 28 August 2017).* Anecdotally, it has been noted that communicating at this time of term also helped the lecturer track students who were engaged but may have fallen behind, and assisted in identifying students who may have become disengaged.

Forums are also available for students to respond to and each week there is a specific forum created for each module: *The only aspect I feel needs improvement is the communication between other distance STEPS students. To encourage teamwork and enhance communication skills, students should not only be encouraged to post a weekly forum, but to reply to at least one post from a fellow student. This would perhaps build the communication abilities of student and also add a sense that the forum posts are ‘heard’ (UE, 2016).* Forums are not used as effectively as they could be by students which means that the strongest possible community support is not being developed. Over the years, a number of different strategies to address this issue have been attempted with only minimal success. Forum success has been dictated by the cohort of students and has been varied across the terms of the delivery of PLU.

One element that was prominent in the student feedback across the board, was the effect that a positive and engaging educator can have on the delivery of the unit. The student evaluations consistently praised the engaging and supportive manner that the different lecturers brought to the unit: *The positive attitude of the lecturer….was certainly catching. She was a great presenter (UE, 2016)*; *Enthusiasm, knowledge and delivery….enthusiasm and willingness to explain…exciting get up and go attitude….passion for what she is teaching….always positive and encouraging….shows a genuine care for her students and what she is teaching (UE, 2012); Kudos to you [lecturer] what an inspiration you are to us all (UE, 2013).* In part, the success of PLU transitioning to a fully online unit could be due to the support provided by the lecturer at the point of need for the student: *Doing this unit distance did not pose any issues as the lecturer was always there to help out and answer questions (UE, 2016)*; *She was a great teacher and was quick with responses when it came to emails (UE, 2016); The best aspects of this unit is my lecturer providing quick feedback when difficulties arose (UE, 2016).*

# *Positive psychology content*

The main focus of PLU is on introducing students to positive psychology concepts. This is underpinned by the CHOOSE model (Sharp, 2007), which enlists six key strategies with the weekly modules arranged around these topics: Clarity, Healthy Living, Optimism, Others, Strengths, and Enjoyment. Students value: *The way each module developed on and expanded the one before it, while at the same time being able to stand alone (UE, 2012); I loved the structure and have learnt an enormous amount (UE, 2013).* The concepts covered aim at assisting with enhancing clarity and identifying personal meaning and values, increasing optimism through changes in thinking, improving personal well-being through a healthier lifestyle, and developing personal strengths and relationships alongside improving communication skills. Each module focuses on a different positive psychology element and introduces the concepts that relate whilst still showing links to past concepts, in effect, scaffolding the learning. Student feedback reflects a high level of student satisfaction with the content: *The online content provided was interesting and informative. I was also impressed with the choice of topics covered in the Modules (UE, 2014); I felt the content was fabulous as I was sceptical at the beginning and there’s enough information without going overboard (UE, 2014).*

### *Innovative Stage (IS)*

### One of the goals when introducing the new positive psychology concepts was to relate them to real life examples in order for the students to gain a deeper understanding. Throughout the modules, students were asked to reflect on the content and apply it to their own personal journey, be it study or life. It was evident through the evaluations that students valued this approach: *I loved how this unit related to everyday life and the real world stories that were throughout each module (UE, 2012); The way each module related the subject matter to real life. It made the learning journey realistic and relatable (UE, 2012).* However, an occasional comment suggested that some students found the reflective element that is used as a core teaching approach was sometimes too personal and confronting: *I found the subjects reflected very much on a personal level which I found challenging at times (UE, 2012); It was a bit personal sometimes but the content was great (UE, 2012).*However, overwhelmingly, student feedback was positive which, although this does not negate the concerns raised by some, suggests that most students benefited from this approach to learning: *This unit provided fascinating insight into myself which I found beneficial (UE, 2014); I learnt a lot about myself as a person and gained some tools to help me combat some personal demons (UE, 2014).* Students often mentioned that the strategies and techniques taught were highly practical and could be applied instantly to their own personal lives: *I gained tools I can use for the rest of my life that will help me see the world and myself in a more positive and helpful way (UE, 2012); This subject made me realise that it is possible to achieve success in life. I now have some great resources to delve into if ever I feel a slight bit of negativity creeping up (UE, 2013).* Some students even shared their belief that the concepts learnt will assist in enhancing their future world: *I believe that I will see the benefits for years to come and the more I practice the strategies I have learnt in this unit, the better life, the better person and the much better student I will become (UE, 2013); It helped me through some difficult times in my life and I have learnt some valuable lessons to take with me in the future (UE, 2013); I found this unit has been valuable and I will use it as a tool for everyday living to foster resilience and motivate me toward my future goals (UE, 2014).*

The evaluations continue to indicate high levels of positivity as students reflect how the content helped them to achieve a better ‘self’: *I have learnt a lot from this unit, especially about myself, my thinking and understanding of others (UE, 2012); The modules were very interesting personally and as a student valuable skills in the development of interpersonal reflection, self-esteem, confidence and motivation (UE, 2012).* For some students, PLU introduced them to a new career possibility: *I loved the concept of Positive Psychology and has sparked my interest immensely in this field (UE, 2014); I really like this unit as I am going into psychology and learning about positive psychology was a great insight to what my course will entail (UE, 2014).* Some students reflected how PLU helped them in their learning journey: *The whole aspect of staying positive throughout study has really assisted me in staying on the right track (UE, 2014).*

### *Enhancement Stage (ES)*

Although feedback on the initial offering was generally positive in relation to the content, one particular feedback response emphasised to the Unit Coordinator that the content and actual concepts required honing and further development. The student stated that: *The content was the aspect in most need of improvement in my opinion…I understand the principle behind the unit and grant there is cause for such a unit….I found the content basic, felt it dragged out and I found it difficult to maintain enthusiasm or motivation (UE, 2014).* At this point, in the enhancement stage of the unit, the Unit Coordinator enrolled and completed a Diploma in Positive Psychology through the Langley Institute (2014). The diploma delivered an in-depth look at the current field of Positive Psychology and some of the most recent revelations that research within this field has discovered. The learnings from this course were instrumental in further developing and refining PLU and these changes made in the enhancement stage have remained in the current offering.

Whilst considering the aspects to update, unit evaluations helped to identify the concepts that students found most beneficial. Students’ specific comments spoke to a number of the key concepts covered and demonstrated how, as individuals, different concepts resonated more strongly depending on their current personal situation: *I found the modules on change, awareness and positive psychology enjoyable and practical. They definitely add to my understanding of the challenges with respect to not only transitioning into academic life, but also the practical application of some of the techniques to my peers (UE, 2015); The best aspect of this unit was definitely the material, and learning about ourselves and the people around us (UE, 2015). Another* spoke about positive health and: *[T]he connection with how positivity reflects on eating habits, sleep, goal making and decisions. Overall I learnt that I cannot control the outcome but I can change how I feel about it through simple understanding and steps (UE, 2014).* Students often referred to the core concept, of Optimism: *I valued creating avenues to deal with negative thoughts and how to overcome those to benefit my study (UE, 2015); This unit helped me to see how my thoughts affect my behaviour towards others and how I see myself (UE, 2015); This unit teaches how important positivity is for students and I think it has boosted my self-confidence enormously (UE, 2015).* The understanding of ‘self’ manifested in identity, determination, awareness and capacity for change: *I found that with this unit that I was able to learn a lot about myself that I did not know I had in me…helped me a lot about dealing with stressful situation and I am grateful for the resources that were given to us in order to better our learning journey (UE, 2015).*

# *Refinement Stage (RS)*

What was evident within the student evaluations was the level of positivity around the content being delivered. Respondents overwhelmingly shared how the content had benefited them personally: *The concepts in this unit not only help with study but also work and home life. This unit teaches you how to cope with the obstacles that you may face at university and life in general. I have learned so much about myself and can feel the positive changes already (UE, 2016).; The unit subject matter was enlightening and I have utilized much of it into my own life. The combination of these things make for a wonderful learning experience, and is the best aspects of the unit (UE, 2016).* In addition, students commented on how they are able to apply a range of psychological tools to how they think about themselves and their life journey: *The best aspects of this unit has been the encouragement to change the mental outlook of study and become more positive towards life in general instead of living in a state of negativity and it gave ideas and solutions for change (UE, 2016); I am extremely grateful for choosing this unit. Clearly defined topics each week, built up to a complete array of psychological tools that I can take into undergraduate studies (UE, 2016).* Students felt that they were being extended depending on their own personal situation. Of note, and as expected for such a unit, a couple of students relayed a strong sense of dissatisfaction with PLU, finding the experience quite draining: *This unit was a waste of my time. I don’t feel like this has helped me with my future studies (UE, 2014)*. This is welcomed feedback as it allows for freedom of expression for the students to express dissatisfaction and encourages the unit coordinator to further investigate the source of discontent as a guide to further unit enhancement. However, for those who appreciated the content, their comments reflected the value they gained from studying this unit: *I like how the author of module materials encourages students to do further research into topics that needs extra attention depending on student’s needs (UE, 2106); First, I would just like to say I loved this unit. We all want to change, but really no one ever knows where to start. This unit not only helps you to change, but helps you get to know why we think like we do and the tools to change it (UE, 2015).*

# **Discussion**

When reviewing students’ constructive comments on what they found valuable and aspects that require improving, there has been a consistent flow of data that has driven change within the PLU unit since its inception. Student comments, from the earliest edition through to the most current, reflect this: *I absolutely loved all of this unit and I would just like to say that when I got fed-up with other units, this is the one that I came to calm down because I enjoyed it the most. (UE, 2012); I loved this unit. It was definitely my favourite out of them all (UE, 2016).* Magyar-Moe (2011, p. 4), in a study looking at how Positive Psychology can be integrated into Psychology units, asserts that “students typically demonstrate a lot of enthusiasm and excitement when learning about positive psychology topics, regardless of the course in which the material is incorporated” and this is evidenced within the feedback from this unit. *Positive psychology is amazing. I love the unit and I love the strategies suggested. With mental illness being a taboo subject, I think more subjects like this should be offered as it offers a way to critically think about your situation and implement strategies to help (UE, 2017).* James (2016) notes that there is a strong indicator that students’ beliefs and thoughts play a major role in successful learning. In a unit like PLU, the students will only attain the depth of understanding and knowledge proportionate to their willingness to be open-minded about the concepts and to action them in their own personal lives. One student expressed it perfectly when they said: *I believe the power of positive psychology is untapped for some students. The negativity about how it relates to university and study purposes is unjustified. Realistically they need to spend more time looking at this subject and reading for it will help many students complete undergrad with the level of variables present in today’s society (UE, 2017).*

From a professional development lens, student evaluations can, and do, elicit mixed reaction from teaching staff, with potential to be both intimidating and rewarding. Whilst this paper does not investigate the effectiveness of student evaluations and the myriad of positions taken over the past few decades, one comment that resonates strongly from Spencer (1994) was that although students indicated that they were willing to do evaluations and to provide feedback to faculty, they had little confidence that faculty or administrators actually paid heed to their comments. Although some educators utilise feedback and value it as a professional development tool, there is a concern that “students are not qualified judges of an instructor’s mastery of his or her subject, are too immature to make consistent judgments, are easily seduced by the pyrotechnics of a polished presentation, and realistically cannot be in a position to evaluate the long term benefits of a course” (Spencer, 1994, p. 22). Notwithstanding these objections, some educators find the exercise of evaluating units of study a powerful tool for eliciting feedback to improve instruction. Indeed, in this unit, the student evaluations were regarded as a valuable tool and each thought expressed by students was taken into account. This valuable source, alongside the professional discretion of the educator, is a powerful combination to drive responsible change to the unit. In particular for PLU, firstly, the educator is in the position of being accountable to the administrators of the STEPS Course; secondly, the educator needs to justify comments and identify changes to enhance the unit through an Annual Unit Review process; and finally, the educator has the credentials and qualifications to base decisions on their own deliberations. However, it would be astute to reason that educators appreciate positive reinforcement about the unit they teach and the value that students place on their professional contribution: *I enjoyed this unit very much. Very challenging at times but also very rewarding. I loved everything about this subject including coordinator, lecturers and markers. The feedback was very positive (UE, 2016).*

# **Conclusion**

The student voice has played an integral role in directing change to the PLU unit. Student evaluations gathered on completion of each term were scrutinised and suggestions to enhance the unit were considered and then acted on under the professional discretion of the educator. From 2012 through to 2017, PLU has undergone three stages of change, from the innovative stage, to the enhancement stage and finally, the refinement stage. The most notable changes driven by the student voice occurred within the delivery of the unit and these included moving the unit to a fully online offering, presenting visual data through short five-minute SnapShots, and timing communication to more effectively capture and engage students. The Positive Psychology content was another aspect revisited through this time period and unit material was updated to reflect current trends and theories. Further, an opportunity for professional development to assist the educator to stay abreast of changes in the field of Positive Psychology ensured that the theories presented in the unit were driven and validated through research. However, this journey of change has not ended as expectations from the university to integrate current trends such as social innovation and indigenisation are now to be considered and incorporated in the unit. Moreover, throughout these new changes, the student voice will continue to assist the educators in ensuring that content and delivery remain relevant for the cohort enrolled in PLU.

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