

# Holistic Outcomes Oriented First Year Curriculum Design in Teacher Education

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For pre-service teachers the first year in higher education is often a challenging time as students struggle with new academic, institutional, personal, professional and financial demands. First Year Experience initiatives aim to support students with these demands yet they are usually presented and delivered as separate from academic study. Arguably, first year curriculum design can facilitate the students' first year transition or hinder it. In this paper we advocate for an approach to first year curriculum design that supports first year students' transition by focusing on *soft outcomes*, such as building their personal resilience and self-efficacy, in addition to *hard outcomes* such as their academic competencies and results. Our argument draws upon current higher education curriculum design principles to propose that first year curricula in professional degrees, such as teacher education, could focus on both *soft outcomes* and *hard outcomes* in order to foster students' holistic well-being and support transition.

## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, when the first year in higher education (FYHE) emerged as a distinct learning, teaching and research area, it has been prioritised in Australian institutions of higher education. The demands driving higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century also, increasingly, emphasise the need to focus on the first year experience and outcomes: changes in funding to higher education institutions; increasing competition for student EFTSL; widening participation; and measurement and accountability agendas (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). More recently, as the national focus on raising primary and secondary education levels has drawn wide media attention to pre-service teacher training, the FYHE has become an area of particular concern and interest for those teaching and researching into teacher education.

Approaches to supporting and enabling first year student transition have evolved through a number of iterations. Recently, Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) argued for a third generation approach where first year transition is seen as a whole of institution responsibility. In this scenario all institutional stakeholders work together to seamlessly integrate and embed transition strategies (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). How the curriculum is designed, delivered, and experienced by students is foundational to their successful transition to higher education and ongoing tertiary studies. It is now three years after this approach was proposed and most institutions are concentrating on providing an institutionally supported FYHE. However in curriculum design there has been very little change in expected explicit course and program outcomes; they mostly remain academically focused.

In this paper we argue for a re-evaluation of current approaches to first year curriculum design to better support pre-service teachers' ongoing personal and professional development as well as their transition into their academic studies. We propose that curriculum design in the first year in teacher education should not only support pre-service teachers' academic success but also facilitate their holistic wellbeing, in particular, their personal resilience and self-efficacy. We suggest that helping pre-service students to develop these qualities could aid them career wise and may assist in the retention concerns voiced by many (Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, Burke, & Louviere, 2013; Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce & Hunter, 2010; Le Cornu 2013).

There has been some research undertaken on pre-service teacher's resilience but not within the realm of FYHE and first year pre-service teacher education. For instance Mansfield, Price, McConney, Beltman, Pelliccione, and Wosnitza (2012) have developed a resilience framework for graduating pre-service and early-career teachers. Their four dimensions of teacher resilience

include: professional (the practice of teaching); emotional; motivational (motivation and enthusiasm); and social. Our paper extends the work of Mansfield et al. (2012) by considering how resilience and self-efficacy could be incorporated into first year teacher education curriculum design.

### **Student holistic wellbeing – four areas for action and curriculum design integration**

In parallel with Mansfield et al.'s (2012) four dimensions of teacher resilience we are proposing that there are four critical areas of health promotion action within the first year experience that could be positively influenced through a wellbeing oriented curriculum design (See Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Four proposed areas (APPS) of a holistic view of student wellbeing.

#### *Academic Wellbeing*

We argue that Academic wellbeing is addressed by the current curricular approach and is measured through traditional assessment. Teaching staff can measure and monitor the academic wellbeing of students through grades and achievement of pre-established graduate outcomes and skills. A quick analysis of the grade books of most classes will quickly identify the students who are academically well (Distinction and High Distinction), compared with those who are fair (Pass and Credit), compared with those who struggle (Fail or Withdrawn).

#### *Physical Wellbeing*

Physical activity is relatively limited in the student population with approximately 60% of male students and less than 25% of female students achieving recommended physical activity guidelines (Irwin, 2004). Yet, physical activity is one of the best ways of managing stress in a university setting and beyond. Furthermore, physical activity is often associated with other healthy behaviours in student populations, while lack of physical activity can be associated with poor health status and risky behaviours. Finally, involvement in physical activity can improve social wellbeing as well as other aspects of a student's satisfaction with university experiences and programs, including overall quality of life (Irwin, 2004).

#### *Social Wellbeing*

Courtney, Caltabiano and Ricciardelli (2012) define wellbeing as Objective Wellbeing (OWB) and Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) (Psychological and Social) (Figure 9.1, p. 115) with different theoretical models listing a range of dimensions associated with SWB. They suggest that

“subpopulation differences need to be considered when developing SWB models so that precise interventions can be developed to address the specific needs of each subpopulation” (p. 119). In line with their model it is important to also focus on social health promotion as this is an area often overlooked and one that can have a major impact on the first year experience, with students reporting difficulty in making friends, accessing staff, and experiencing an enjoyable learning environment (Kantanis, 2000). A large percentage of students report social isolation due to social anxiety, workload or a combination of the two (Sashittal, Jassawall, & Markulis, 2012). This may impact even more students from international and non-traditional backgrounds (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Yusoff, 2011).

### *Psychological Wellbeing*

There is a growing body of evidence from various disciplines indicating that first year students are at a critical point for significant psychological and behavioural risks (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007; Wong, Cheung, Chan, Ma, & Tang, 2006). In fact the majority of studies about wellbeing in the academic environment are about students who seek counselling. The prevalence of mental health issues is becoming a critical health promotion concern (Bitsika, Sharpley, & Rubenstein, 2010; Rowling, Weber, & Scanlon, 2005; Stallman, 2010). Stallman and Shochet (2009) reported high prevalence rates (between 45% and 84%) of psychological distress in various university populations. Such elevated stress levels, especially over extended periods of time, could have direct impact on academic performance. In Australia, the prevalence of mental disorders (i.e. anxiety, affective and substance use disorder) of 12 months or longer resulting in functional impacts is reportedly at over 25% in the 16-24 age groups with women being at higher risk than men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The aforementioned can be associated with transition periods such as transition from high school to university or from university to the workplace (Jones & Creedy, 2012).

As 31% of the students surveyed in Stallman and Shochet’s (2009) study were first year undergraduates it is possible that many first year students may not be able to enjoy a positive first year experience unless key issues are addressed and appropriate resources are developed as part of the curriculum design.

### *Resilience*

Resilience is an example of such a resource and it is defined as the ability to keep going during difficult times and to overcome difficult situations (Newman, 2004). Resilience, consisting of a collection of cognitive and behavioural coping skills (Connor & Davidson, 2003) has been identified as an appropriate focus for mental health promotion interventions in a university setting (Stallman, 2011; Stallman & Shochet, 2009). The National Summit on the Mental Health of Tertiary Students (2011) recommended more attention to mental health promotion in tertiary institutions with a specific attention on embedding resilience training in curriculum and course design. Embedding resilience building within the first year curriculum is supported by the principles from the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organisation, 1986).

A multilevel approach focused on developing outcomes, such as resilience, could be based on the Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion areas of action and may include: development of personal skills (i.e. resilience); creation of supportive environments (i.e. through curriculum design); reorientation of health services from clinical care to primary care (i.e. disease prevention and health promotion); and strengthening community action (i.e. including students in curriculum design processes). We propose that inclusion of such an approach in the first year curriculum could facilitate students’ holistic wellbeing as well as underpinning their later years of study.

## The current curricula context

The current curricular approach in Australian higher education is constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Constructive alignment is an outcomes-based model of curriculum where the means are purposed to achieve specific pre-determined ends. A constructively aligned curriculum begins with considering the behavioural change that one wants to see students adopt, tailoring pedagogy and learning so that students have opportunities to engage with the desired behaviours and setting assessments so that students can demonstrate the desired behaviour (Figure 2). This teacher-centred and directed approach to curriculum is concerned with predetermined outcomes that can be assessed and measured.

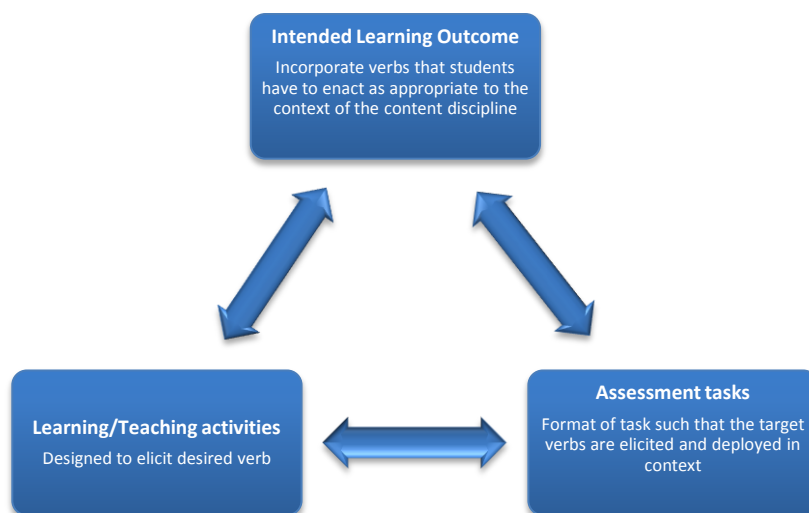


Figure 2. Constructive alignment (based on Biggs & Tang, 2011).

While constructive alignment dominates Australian higher education and thus teacher education, those who research into the first year in higher education advocate for specific considerations for first year curriculum design. For example Kift (2008) suggests that first year curriculum should aid student transition *from* previous educational experience *to* learning in higher education; cater to student diversity; be student focused and provide the scaffolding for learning success; be engaging and respond to social, personal, ethical and interpersonal capabilities. Similarly, Mansfield et al. (2012) argue for a resilience building curriculum that embeds resilience into learning and teaching by providing opportunities in courses for students to:

- develop skills in personal problem solving, organisation, conflict resolution, negotiation, coping, emotional management;
- engage in self-reflection on their own personal development, self-efficacy, motivation and preparation for the profession;
- be professionally proactive and take responsibility;
- engage in self-direction and solve problems;
- understand that seeking help is not a weakness;
- experience competence and develop self-efficacy;
- manage social and emotional stress; and
- act in ways that promote resilience (e.g. building personal and professional support network). (p. 19)

There is no argument that Kift's (2008) curriculum considerations and Mansfield et al.'s (2012) resilience building principles are factors for consideration in first year curriculum design. However, the very nature of these holistic outcomes is problematic under the current curriculum design

regime – constructive alignment. For instance, how to design learning and teaching to ensure that students have the opportunities to engage with subjective resilience building skills, how to assess whether they have achieved those subjective outcomes, and at what level of understanding is difficult in a curriculum design that is driven by a “hard outcomes” approach where hard outcomes translate as *teacher* determined, *teacher* directed, and *teacher* assessed.

We argue for an alternative approach to first year transition curriculum that is characterised by both hard academic outcomes and holistic soft outcomes where such outcomes are *learner* determined, *learner* directed and *learner* assessed and measured. Soft outcomes in this instance address students’ psychosocial and physical wellbeing. In this approach students’ acquisition of soft outcomes supports and enables their achievement of academic learning and professional goals (Figure 3).

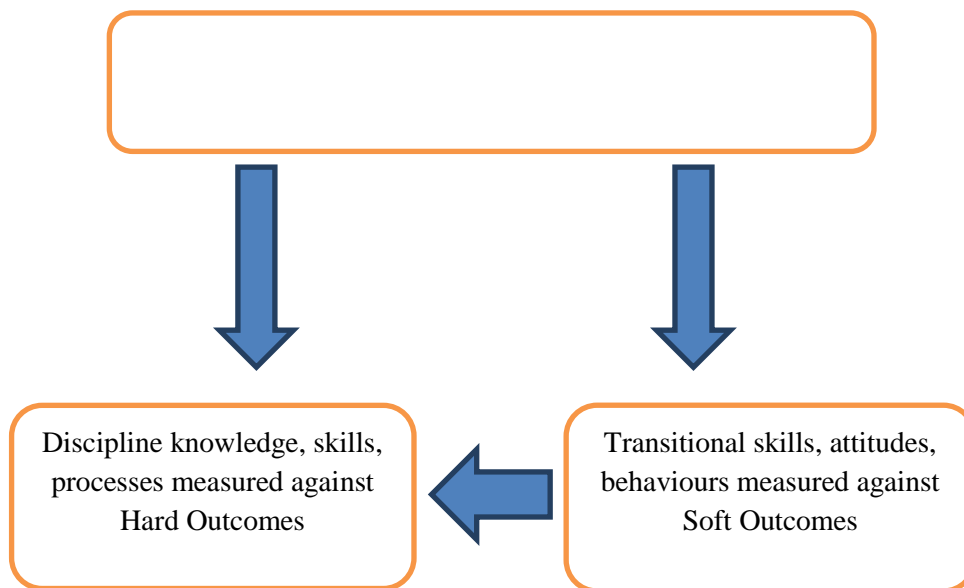


Figure 3. FYHE curriculum: A hard and soft outcomes approach.

### Soft outcomes in teacher education

A curriculum that is characterised by soft outcomes is generally focused on learners developing interpersonal skills, organisational skills, analytical skills and personal skills (Dewson, Eccles, Tackey, & Jackson, 2000). Such a curriculum is not concerned with *objective* measurement of learner behavioural change but rather with measuring learner success according to the learner’s perceptions of his or her own progress towards a goal. Characteristics of soft outcomes are:

- Success is not measured directly or tangibly but by the distance travelled by learners towards goals rather than their final achievement;
- Soft outcomes differ from key skills in that they are sensitive to context; and
- Measuring soft outcomes has a subjective dimension including the experiences of learners. (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 663)

The literature of the first year in higher education, pre-service teacher education, and soft outcomes, some of which has been referred to here, lists a range of soft outcomes that support the higher

education student's academic engagement and success. These include: being responsible, organised, proactive, reflective, self-aware, communicative, and motivated; working autonomously and collaboratively; being able to problem solve, take the initiative, manage responsibilities and physical and emotional stress; and having a strong sense of self and social relationship building skills (Dewson et al., 2000; Lizzio, 2006; Mansfield et al., 2012; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Approaches to addressing soft outcomes in curriculum design vary. Mansfield et al. (2012) argue that resilience and coping skills are best achieved when embedded into individual courses. Similarly, Stallman (2011) reports on an embedded 90 minute *Staying on Track* seminar that emphasises to students the importance of attaining such skills by normalising them as applicable to all students (p. 130). However, we suggest that, in practice, such strategies are rarely securely entrenched by institutional policies and practices and are susceptible to being overlooked or eliminated in subsequent course revisions. La Trobe University (2012) provides an alternative approach by offering a first year pre-service teacher education 10 week course that specifically focuses on students' holistic wellbeing. *Concepts of Wellbeing* is designed for students to "explore, develop and reflect on their attitudes and behaviours towards their own and other people's physical, social, emotional mental, environmental and spiritual health and overall wellbeing" (para. 1). However, attaining such outcomes is questionable when, as a credit point course, students must, by institutional requirement, undertake assessment of 4000 words which undermines the expressed aim of developing self-efficacy. A more effective targeted and structured approach sympathetic to first year experience aims has yet to be presented in the research literature.

Synthesising from the literature and from a combined 45 years of authorial experience in higher education we propose a curriculum approach that specifically targets resilience building and self-efficacy outcomes, one that is not an independent credit point course but runs parallel to the academic curriculum. For example:

1. Wellbeing learning begins in the first weeks of first semester with an emphasis on the importance of resilience, coping skills, and self-efficacy for student engagement and academic success and entails opportunities for students to deconstruct what it means "to cope" and to have a "strong sense of self". This would be underpinned by an introduction to the institutional student support services that would be promoted as proactive resources for all students; aiming to remove the *remedial* label.
2. Students self-assess their own levels of resilience and coping skills and consider which areas they need to work on. There are many studies available reporting on such assessment tools such as Core Self-Evaluations (Elliott, Kaliski, Burrus, & Roberts, 2013), the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Sleijpen, June ter Heide, Mooren, Boeije, Kleber, 2013), and the Resilience scale for adults (RSA) and Resilience scale for adolescents (READ) (Hjemdal, 2010).
3. Students formulate a plan to address their own areas of need and identify goals selecting a *soft* indicator tool to assist them in charting their own progress towards their goal such as reflective diaries or an outcomes star (see Figure 4).
4. Staff and counsellors work with students to identify how the students might achieve their goals initially using commonly available support and how they will assess that they have reached their goal.

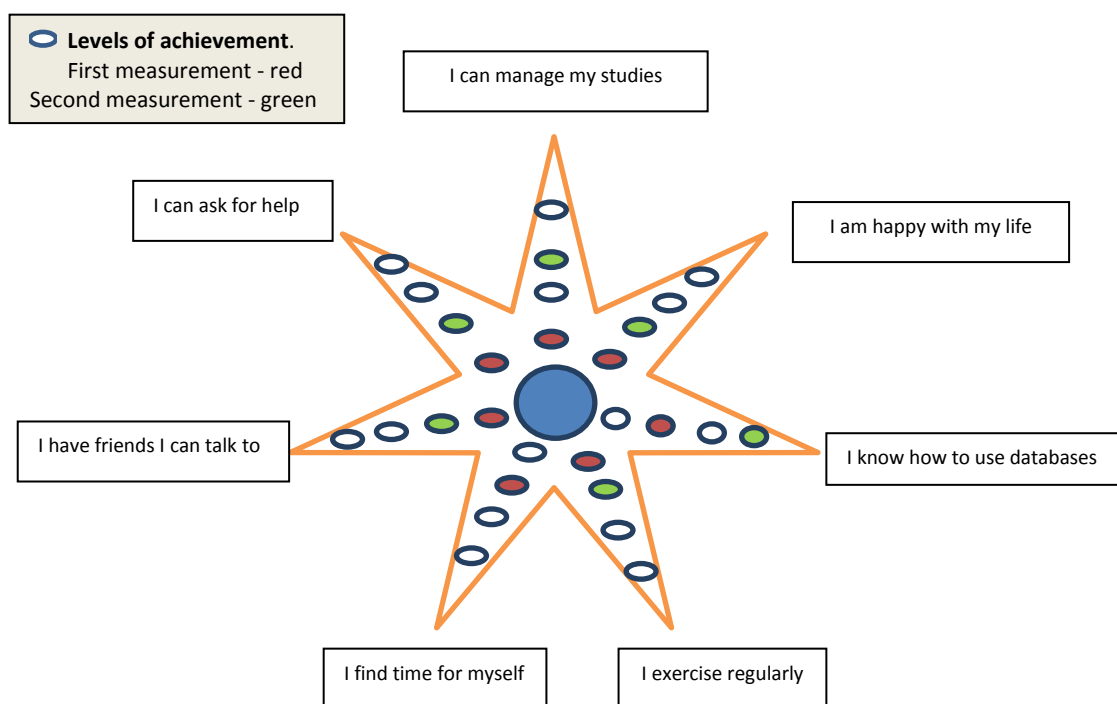


Figure 4. Soft outcomes indicator.

This approach to students' development of soft outcomes differs from approaches previously mentioned in that it operates outside of the mandated course work and supports the students in taking responsibility for their own holistic wellbeing.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have suggested that higher education institutions in Australia, if not across the world, have become so focused on accountability and measurement, as exemplified by the current higher education curriculum approach, that they have, to some extent, prioritised the needs of the system over the student's wellbeing needs. While the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation approach to the FYHE (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010) goes a considerable way to embedding FYHE best practices into systemic policy and practice, it is still an approach that is enacted upon the student. The case we present here is for a dual curriculum approach that recognises the importance of the first year student's holistic wellbeing for their academic success. Our student centred approach suggests that the student, with initial guidance and support, assumes responsibility for his or her own learning, wellbeing and academic success. This paper has focused on pre service teacher education, however, as our proposed approach to developing the students' wellbeing is presented as intrinsic to the first year experience in higher education, it could be equally as relevant to any discipline.

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