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Positive Psychology in Higher Education: The Happy Power Project – A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper presents the activities and results of the transnational Erasmus+ Happy Power Project 2023-1-ES01_KA220-HED-000153853. *The project aims to improve the well-being of undergraduates and graduates in several European higher education institutions (Spain, Finland, Belgium, Romania, Italy), and propose an intervention model that may be extended nationally and even globally. The Happy Power project focuses on the undergraduates' personal growth, relying on the theory of positive psychology. By the activities designed for undergraduates, the project promotes positive emotions, optimism, resilience, and strengths to raise graduates' employability, empower them to cope with a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) environment, and experience greater life satisfaction, less stress, and enhanced mental health. In this paper, there are presented the theoretical framework of the Happy Power project concept, project activities and results, and project impact based on teachers' and undergraduates' testimonials. The goal is to encourage other higher education institutions to focus on their undergraduates' well-being by applying positive psychology activities proposed within the Happy Power project.*

Keywords: case study; positive psychology; university; well-being

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1. Background – Positive psychology in a VUCA environment

The challenges of undergraduates in today's VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment demand pedagogical and higher-education management strategies to foster resilience and a positive mindset at students and graduates to help them adjust to a world shaped by rapid technological shifts, economic instability, and versatile job markets.

The pressure of the VUCA environment manifests as follows (Lemoine, Hackett & Richardson, 2017; Sari & Soamole, 2024):

- Volatility: the fast changes in technology and the rise of Artificial intelligence make it difficult for undergraduates to know which skills will still be relevant following graduation;
- Uncertainty: anxiety about career and finances, expensive education, and economic instability;
- Complexity: heavy academic and social pressures, knowledge overload, challenges related to distinguishing between real and fake data;
- Ambiguity: disorientation and lack of a clear path in life due to a blurred line between right and wrong answers in modern problem-solving because of social, and economic instability worldwide, and od the fact that traditional formulas for success seem to no longer yield the expected results.

To survive and thrive in the context described above, undergraduates need to build and develop skills such as (Lemoine, Hackett & Richardson, 2017; Martin, 2024; Sari & Soamole, 2024):

- digital literacy, adaptability, and flexibility in learning and using ever-changing digital platforms;
- critical thinking and cognitive flexibility to be able to address problems and challenges from multiple perspectives;
- emotional intelligence and stress management to build resilience, and overcome anxiety, burnout, and maintain good mental health against challenges and stress in higher education.

Hence, besides updating teaching methodologies and content to keep up with technological progress, to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process within this VUCA context, teachers also need to develop new skills such as "stress management, adaptability, creativity, technological skills, and time management" (Minciu et al., 2025).

The theory of positive psychology relies on the assumption that the wellbeing of individuals depends on the level of fulfilling three basic psychological needs: experiencing positive emotions, engaging in meaningful activities, and building and maintaining positive relationships with others (Seligman, 2002). According to positive psychology, satisfying these psychological needs requires cultivating strengths, positive emotions, and meaningful life experiences, these being the conditions for achieving wellbeing designated by the central concept of this theory: "to flourish".

To define and measure wellbeing, Seligman (2011) elaborated the PERMA model comprising five conditions for wellbeing: **P**ositive emotions (experiencing positive feelings and emotions such as joy, satisfaction, awe); **E**ngagement (experiencing the pleasure derived from performing an activity); **R**elationships (social connections of good quality and appropriate quantity within and outside one's group); **M**eaning (having a sense of purpose or meaning in life); and **A**ccomplishment (experiencing achievement of goals and progression towards goals). In Seligman's model, health is viewed as objective wellness, meaning the absence of disease and illness, healthy lifestyles, vitality, and energy to perform daily activities (Allen et al., 2022; Beacham et al., 2020).

Besides the three psychological needs of positive emotions, positive relationships, and meaningful activities, two more needs were added later as contributing to well-being and flourishing: finding meaning and pleasure in the activities and enjoying achievements and accomplishments.

The idea of deriving pleasure out of an activity connects Seligman's positive psychology theory to Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Flow is a state defined by being fully immersed in an activity and enjoying it. The state of flow is associated with being highly motivated, productive, creative, and efficient, helping people achieve even things they would otherwise deem impossible (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). In Seligman's PERMA model, flow is the equivalent of the letter 'E' – engagement defined by the pleasure and joy derived from performing the activity or task.

Positive psychology theory provides the necessary tools to help undergraduates build the required skills to navigate a VUCA environment successfully: adaptability and flexibility in learning, critical thinking and cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence and stress management, resilience, and maintaining a positive mindset for good mental health (Oades et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011).

The purpose of the descriptive case study presented in this article is twofold (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010; Yin, 2018):

(1) to provide descriptive information on the Happy Power positive psychology project;

(2) to highlight the theoretical and practical relevance of the Happy Power positive psychology project activities and results.

This article seeks to answer the following research question: What are the benefits of a positive psychology approach, as elaborated in the Happy Power project, to empowering undergraduates to build and maintain wellbeing, and flourish while navigating a VUCA environment?

2. Case study - the Happy Power project

2.1. Happy Power project presentation

To achieve a program for fostering undergraduates' wellbeing that could be extended nationally, and even globally beyond the universities participating in the Happy Power project, to connect the various stakeholders involved in the education of students, and promote positive psychology interventions, the project team designed and elaborated the following project results:

(1) **An interactive learning platform with modules and guidelines for higher education teachers and undergraduates (https://ubiqua.uvic.cat/):** a modular training program comprising an interactive guide with essential pedagogical principles, classroom planning, visual aids, and practical tips to help teachers effectively deliver the positive psychology program.

The topics of the positive psychology modules on the Ubiqua Learning Platform are: Emotions, Irrational beliefs, the ABC model, Personal values, Locus of control, the PERMA model, Pessimism and depression, Optimism, Global wellbeing, Action plan. There is also a Presentation module, a Closure module, and a good practices module.

The theoretical background for the module on emotions draws on positive psychology theories (Ackerman, 2018; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the role of positive and negative emotions in our lives (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009), primary and secondary emotions (Guy-Evans, 2023), constructed emotion theory (Barret, 2017), and basic emotions theory (Ekman & Friesen, 1971).

The modules on Irrational beliefs and the ABC model are discussed based on positive psychology and cognitive therapy theories (Beck, Freeman & Davis, 2015; Ellis, 1991).

Personal values are approached from the perspective of the core strengths and virtues theory - courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) - and the pursuit of meaningfulness in life theory (Baumeister et al., 2013; Schwartz, 2012).

In the module on locus of control, a distinction is made between internal and external locus of control (Cherry, 2022; Galvin et al., 2018), and it is explained how locus of control impacts emotional dysregulation (Couto & Baptista, 2023).

The module on the PERMA model highlights the five core elements of well-being according to positive psychology: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2018), and the essential role of each of these dimensions in flourishing (Butler & Kern, 2016).

The modules on pessimism, depression, and optimism are presented based on studies and research such as that by Bromberger & Matthews on the effects of pessimism, anxiety, and life stress on depressive symptoms (Bromberger & Matthews, 1996), cognitive therapy to enhance optimism as a cure for depression (Genecov & Seligman, 2023), and on factors of optimism (Forgeard & Seligman, 2012).

Global well-being is presented from the perspective of the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches (Keyes et al., 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001), and also the positive effects of nature on an individual's mood that is designated as environmental well-being (Bratman et al., 2012; Hartig et al., 2014).

The module on the action plan presents the action plan not only as a strategic tool in organizational management, but as an invaluable resource for personal development and growth (Kotter, 2012). The action plan is also connected to the locus of control that may be external or internal (Rotter, 1966) and personal efficiency (Covey, 1989).

The platform section assigned to each of the modules enumerated comprises: a training video with slides supporting the video, a PowerPoint supporting the video for classroom use, an interactive video and interactive book, additional resources (links to further references or videos), a self-assessment questionnaire, a forum of questions on the topic of the respective module, and a module satisfaction questionnaire.

The Ubiqua learning platform appeals to teachers of all subjects by its user-friendly interface, the interactive and attractive way in which the content is presented, the richness of resources, and the variety of forms in which the content is presented (PPTs, videos, interactive videos, interactive books, articles, self-assessment questionnaires, satisfaction questionnaires, links to further resources). The platform also includes a downloadable Teachers' Manual for the Happy Power Learning App, Students' Guidelines for the Happy Power App, and a good practices document on Positive Perspectives in Practice: Teaching for Wellbeing.

The Teachers' Manual for the Happy Power Learning App (https://ubiqua.uvic.cat/course/view.php?id=1092) contains useful information with images on how teachers can access and navigate the Ubiqua Learning Platform, worksheets for teachers, and useful references.

The Students' Guidelines for the Happy Power App contains detailed, useful information with images on how students can access and navigate the Happy Power App, as well as classroom activities in which their teachers will engage them.

The Best Practices guide provides examples of positive psychology activities that the teachers involved in the Happy Power project have performed with their students. This document constitutes a good starting point and encouragement to all teachers who are willing to include positive psychology activities in their classes.

(2) **A learning support application for students:** a gamified technological tool designed to motivate undergraduates to identify and build their strengths, understand positive as well as negative emotions, build resilience, and motivate themselves to work towards their goals, including those that seem impossible at first. The application includes self-assessment tests, practical activities, and motivational messages to help students cultivate character strengths, build resilience, and track their personal growth.

The document Student Guidelines for the Happy Power App (https://ubiqua.uvic.cat/course/view.php?id=1092) provides students with all the necessary details

on the content and practical approach of the Happy Power project, on how to access, sign up, and use the students' application, and also what the application contains. The guidelines document also informs students that the purpose of the project is to enhance their well-being by supporting their personal growth, encouraging them "to focus on their strengths and positive emotions to foster optimism and resilience", and thus further increase their opportunities in the job market and engagement in society (*Student Guidelines for the Happy Power App*, p. 4).

Further, it is described how the Happy Power program works, namely in two ways: through the classroom activities that their teacher engages them in, containing small exercises and discussions with classmates; through the Happy Power students' application that provides additional exercises to support their personal growth. The thematic modules in the students' app will be made available gradually by the teacher involved in applying the program, and any questions should be addressed to the teacher. Students are also informed that all their input in the application is protected and anonymous, and the teacher cannot link it to students.

The students' guidelines document further includes basic information on the positive psychology approach and its potential to help raise personal well-being and resilience by encouraging and providing participants with the strategies to create, seek, develop, maintain, and engage in positive subjective experiences (e.g., fulfilment, flow), positive individual traits (e.g., character strengths, talents, values), positive interpersonal relationships (e.g., friendships, partnerships, communities), and positive institutions (e.g., families, universities, businesses, communities), and accept and learn how to handle challenges as part of personal growth, resilience and development. Whenever challenges or unexpected feelings occur, students are encouraged to view them as fostering connection and growth, and reach out to their teacher or student counselor for help.

The students' application relies on gamification; for example, progress is visually represented as a growing plant. Navigation forward and backwards is possible within the application, allowing students to return to previously covered modules, review notes, and complete exercises. Students can also download exercises as PDFs and include them in a portfolio, as well as complete well-being questionnaires to see how they have grown over time.
The students' application also includes a brief questionnaire elaborated by researchers from various disciplines to see how participants perceive well-being across different areas of life, and use this information to improve and develop educational activities, as well as support a student community. Students are informed that their participation is fully voluntary and independent.

2.2. Methods

The main research methods are the case study and a qualitative analysis of testimonials from teachers and students participating in the Happy Power project.

2.2.1. Project impact based on teachers' testimonials

The project's impact is visible in the Ubiqua learning Platform (https://ubiqua.uvic.cat/), and the students' application, as well as on the LinkedIn project page (https://www.linkedin.com/company/happy-power-uvicucc/posts/?feedView=all&viewAsMember=true).

Proof of the relevance and efficiency of the Happy Power project activities and results may be found, for example, in the Happy Power best practices document entitled Positive Perspectives in Practice: Teaching for Wellbeing (https://ubiqua.uvic.cat/course/section.php?id=14326), in which teachers who have been involved in the project's activities share some of the positive psychology activities that they have successfully applied with their students.
For example, the activity "Identifying and correcting irrational beliefs - ABC model" as described by one of the authors of this paper. The activity is as follows:

Short description/goal: Keeping a diary of irrational beliefs for days/ one week is a practical exercise that helps students become more aware of their automatic thoughts and how

these influence their emotions and behaviour. By observing these patterns over time, students can better understand the connection between thinking styles, stress, and wellbeing.

Activity types: Keeping a diary of irrational beliefs for several days/1 week

Feedback from the students: This exercise promotes self-awareness and reflection. Many irrational beliefs operate automatically and go unnoticed, yet they can increase anxiety, reduce confidence, and hinder learning. Tracking these thoughts helps students recognise recurring patterns and provides a foundation for building healthier, more realistic ways of thinking. Over time, this can strengthen resilience and emotional regulation.

Journey and phases: Ask students to keep a simple daily record for one week. Each time they notice a stressful or negative reaction, they briefly write down:

- The situation – What happened?
- The thought – What went through their mind?
- The feeling – How did it make them feel?
- An alternative thought – A more balanced or realistic way to view the situation.

At the end of the week, encourage reflection: Which thoughts appeared most often? How did reframing affect their feelings? Emphasize that the goal is not to eliminate negative thoughts but to develop a more flexible and constructive mindset. (This Happy Power, positive psychology good practice was applied and described by Ioana Boghian, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacau, Romania).

Moreover, on the LinkedIn Happy Power project page, there are publicly shared interviews with teachers of different specializations, participating in the project, and their opinions on how positive psychology can support teachers and students in higher education. For example, one of the interviewed teachers, L. G. P., argues that the positive psychology approach enabled her to foster a more positive and engaging learning environment for her students and adjust teaching to the students' educational needs. The same teacher also stated that, for her students, the positive psychology approach in her classes and from the students' application really fostered personal development and growth among students, with some of them implementing positive psychology principles in their everyday life. Another interviewed teacher, A. R., stated that applying the positive psychology activities in class has helped him personally by providing him with the tools to manage stress and foster a more positive mindset in the classroom and professionally by integrating well-being and emotional intelligence into his teaching.

According to A. P., some of the most interesting and relevant positive psychology modules were those on the PERMA model, personal values and optimism. This teacher also appreciated the novelty of the Happy Power program, and its contribution to her personal and professional development, feeling enriched with new thought patterns.

Another interviewed teacher, M. D. T. said that the Happy Power resources and activities helped her deal with difficult situations more efficiently and successfully by enabling her to approach situations from different perspectives, finding the ABC model most useful in this respect.

According to another teacher, M. A. I., participating in the Happy Power program helped him develop on the personal level by gaining a broader, more human-centred perspective on the class of students, enabling him to foster emotional awareness, well-being and resilience in his students. Professionally, the program enriched his teaching practice tools and approaches with emotional learning strategies. He found the materials on the platform highly useful, clear and well-structured, some of his favorite modules being those on the locus of control and emotions. He noticed that the Happy Power positive psychology activities increased his students' engagement and collaboration, and immersed them in deeper personal reflections, which has contributed to building a learning environment defined by meaningful conversations in class and empathy. In conclusion, the Happy Power experience has been, for him, highly relevant, useful, and enriching.

All the teachers participating in the Happy Power program would recommend others to participate in the program as this fosters both personal and professional development.

2.2.2. Project impact based on students' testimonials

Based on the students's testimonials (https://www.linkedin.com/company/happy-power-uvicucc/posts/?feedView=all&viewAsMember=true), Happy Power's main impact was not simply providing information about positive psychology, but turning psychological concepts into opportunities for introspection, self-awareness, practical application, and recognition of personal and social challenges. Students described greater understanding of the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour improved wellbeing skills and opportunities to transfer learning into future professional contexts.

One of the interviewed student, N. N., found Ellis's ABC model particularly valuable because it could be applied to everyday situations. Another student, J. K., valued the practical application of the ABC model in understanding the connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.

Moreover, the student considered the activities from the project a "nice introspective journey", helping her raise awareness about certain maladaptive cognitive and behavioral mechanisms. Another positive impact is related to recognition of problematic patterns: the program helped the student identify and understand problematic internal and social dynamics and recognize when further attention or professional support might be needed.

Beyond personal wellbeing, the program was perceived as relevant to students' future professional lives. The students highlighted the active participation and a supportive learning environment, saying that they felt like they were really sharing their thoughts and feeling heard.

One student, A. S., specifically noted that the course encouraged him to consider some situations from different perspectives.

She appreciated the fact that the project activities connected her to other students, both from her university and others, helped her relate and communicate with others, improved her stress management skills, self-confidence and motivation to solve tasks. One of her favorite activities was the one focused on helping students identify their strengths as this worked as motivation to keep a positive attitude towards learning and find ways to improve herself. Another fact that she really loved about the program was that students and teachers participated in the projects' activities together, which enhanced their sense of community, belonging, and friendship.

According to another student, A. D., the Happy Power project activities have helped him gain new perspectives on various situations and have a more positive mindset. Taking part in the project activities improved his well-being, his academic motivation, as well as a constructive view on mistakes, which he now views as opportunities for growth and learning. One of his favorite Happy Power modules was the one about irrational beliefs. He also found teachers to be very supportive, which gave him a sense of relief by knowing that in case of need, there is somebody whom he can ask for help.

All the students participating in the Happy Power project would recommend this program to other students for purposes such as to know themselves better, to build new skills, relationships, and grow both personally and professionally.

3. Discussions and recommendations

Our research question aimed to identify the benefits of a positive psychology approach, as elaborated in the Happy Power project, to empowering undergraduates to build and maintain well-being, and flourish while navigating a VUCA environment.

Based on the data presented in the previous sections, the Happy Power project activities and results can significantly contribute to empower undergraduates to build and maintain well-being, and flourish while navigating a VUCA environment in several ways, as further described.

Firstly, the teachers involved in applying the Happy Power module activities stated that the whole project experience helped them better understand how a positive learning environment works to support students in becoming more engaged in the learning activities, as well as in their personal growth and development. Also, the modules on the Ubiqua learning platform have provided ample material on positive psychology concepts and classroom activities to conduct with students. Therefore, participating in the project has helped them develop professionally by learning new classroom management strategies, and how to adjust activities to the individual needs of their students, and personally by including positive psychology principles, ways of thinking and acting in their lives.

For teachers in the Romanian academic environment, involvement in this project represents another significant step in a twofold paradigm shift—a process unfolding for over 35 years. The first shift views the learner as a fundamentally rational individual defined by academic intelligence and cognitive processes—particularly thought—and characterized primarily by measurable, quantifiable learning outcomes resulting from the efficient functioning of the personality's cognitive dimension. The second shift (converging with the first) posits that the teacher's fundamental, or perhaps even sole, concern is to engage with these very processes: explaining clearly, structuring content appropriately, finding the right language, or providing relevant illustrations. In neither scenario does the emotional dimension appear; it has been, perhaps tacitly, deemed nonexistent, irrelevant, or even shameful, and has consequently been ignored so far. Perhaps this is precisely why the project's activities served as an opportunity for professional development: a chance to systematically practice the reflective and self-reflective aspects of the teacher's personality, and acknowledge, apply, and effectively leverage the emotional component within teaching.

Secondly, students have confirmed that the Happy Power classroom activities and those from the students' application have really helped them build a more positive mindset, enhanced self-esteem and more positive relationships by including positive psychology principles in their lives, transforming their perspective, their way of thinking, and habits.

For some students, the project's activities marked a first encounter with this subject matter—a primary scientific connection to positive psychology in practice—and a new opportunity to cultivate self-reflection while advancing along the path of self-discovery and emotional self-regulation. For others, the activities represented steps toward personal growth and self-affirmation. In a society that is versatile, contradictory and fast-paced—characterized by rising stress levels—the exercises undertaken by all the students offered a moment of respite and introspection. They allowed for a recognition of the dual nature of existence and our inner lives—particularly the emotional realm, with its inherent strengths and limitations, beauty and pain—while also empowering students with basic strategies to build adaptability and resilience, and structure and maintain their well-being.

The Happy Power project activities contribute to empowering undergraduates to build and maintain well-being, and flourish while navigating a VUCA environment, by fostering resilience, a positive mindset, understanding of the role of both positive and negative emotions, strategies to tackle challenges, and view difficulties as learning opportunities.

4. Conclusions

The positive impact of the Happy Power project results on undergraduates' well-being, and ability to build and maintain well-being, and flourish has been documented in the teachers' and students' testimonials. In accordance with the literature on positive psychology, the Happy Power program has helped both teachers and students at the personal and professional/academic level.

For the teachers involved in the program, the project activities and content on positive psychology concepts and practices acted as a buffer against professional burnout and enriched their pedagogical creativity. For the undergraduates participating in the program, the project activities provided them with the cognitive and emotional tools necessary to navigate academic stressors, raise learning engagement and motivation, and build maturity.

The Happy Power program has worked as an ecosystem where teachers and students have grown simultaneously and interdependently. The teachers applying the Happy Power modules experienced higher career fulfillment, whereas their students experienced higher emotional support, relatedness, and academic success.

Rather than hyper-focusing on fixing weaknesses, positive psychology teaches individuals to identify and intentionally apply their innate character strengths (e.g., perspective, perseverance, or leadership). For students, utilizing a strengths-based learning approach changes their mindset from deficit-correction to growth, increasing their intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and task persistence; teachers who practice strengths-based lesson planning and use their core individual talents to structure engaging syllabi and navigate complex classroom dynamics achieve greater job satisfaction (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Hodges & Clifton, 2004).

Mindfulness is an attentional cognitive strategy that involves maintaining a present-moment awareness without judgment. For students, it functions as a critical psychological buffer, drastically reducing academic burnout, improving cognitive focus, and lowering test-related anxiety; for teachers, mindfulness provides emotional regulation, granting instructors the patience and intuition needed to adapt to real-time classroom disruptions and mitigate chronic workplace fatigue (Miller, 2026).

The Happy Power program also builds resilience in students as the ability to adapt, bounce back, and structurally learn from adverse situations, failures, or critical feedback. A growth mindset shifts a student's view of mistakes from absolute indicators of personal failure to necessary milestones for cognitive development. It actively counteracts learned helplessness. (Gilpin, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

For teachers, developing sophisticated emotional intelligence and empathetic communication allows teachers to deliver constructive feedback that respects student autonomy while boosting a sense of classroom belonging; compassionate pedagogical strategies activate classroom engagement, minimize baseline student anxiety, and directly enrich the overall institutional climate (Meyers et al., 2019; Wang & Xi, 2025).

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