

**TOWARDS A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC THEORY OF  
FLOURISHING: EXPLORATIONS ON THE MEANING,  
MEASUREMENT, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF  
FLOURISHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Positive psychology has emerged as an antidote to the negativistic focus of mainstream psychology and human flourishing has recently been identified as its underlying aim. Flourishing is also the aim of positive education, an applied area of positive psychology that uses wellbeing theories and research on students in educational settings. Although there are several positive psychological theories of flourishing, a key limitation of these is “contextlessness,” or the tendency to neglect the role of context in flourishing. I argue there are three specific facets of contextlessness: in the conceptualisation of flourishing, in its measurement, and in the relationships between flourishing and its wider contexts.

To address this gap, I present a series of exploratory studies aimed at contextualising flourishing. Higher education was selected as an appropriate setting for this work as positive education is limited at tertiary level and would benefit from contextualised understandings of flourishing. Findings of the studies – both qualitative and quantitative – provided novel and insightful understandings of flourishing as it is understood by students in higher education, aided the development and validation of a psychometric tool that measures context-specific flourishing in higher education, and enabled the exploration of flourishing in higher education in the political, economic, and cultural contexts within which higher education operates. Overall, results suggest flourishing in higher education is a complex and unique notion not always accountable by extant positive psychological theories.

The thesis culminates in the proposition of a new theoretical framework, complementing extant theories, which enables flourishing to be understood and researched with greater recognition of the role of context. Further implications of the research and suggestions for the future are discussed with regard to the findings.

## DECLARATION OF PRIOR PUBLICATION

Some of the arguments and findings presented in this thesis have previously been published, submitted for publication, or are in preparation as manuscripts as follows:

Gokcen, N., & Hefferon, K. (2011). Learning to flourish: An inductive content analysis of students' constructions of flourishing in British higher education. *Proceedings of the London International Conference on Education*, 7-10 November 2011 (pp. 162-167). London: Infonomics Society.

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Gokcen, N., Hefferon, K., Dancey, C.P., & Attree, E.A. (in preparation). Wellbeing in UK undergraduates: Relationships with student consumerist attitudes, political persuasion, and trust in government.

In compliance with the University of East London Manual of General Regulations, Part 9, section 19, clause 19.8, copies of already published work (Gokcen & Hefferon, 2011; Gokcen et al., 2012) are submitted with this thesis.

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In this thesis, my main argument rests upon the principle that it is important to consider the context of things. I would contradict myself, therefore, if I did not recognise the role of the vast social context within which this thesis was prepared.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Abstract

In this chapter I give a general introduction to the thesis and the research issue it addresses. I begin with a brief consideration of colloquial definitions of “flourishing.” Two major philosophical theories of flourishing – nature fulfilment and consequentialism – are then summarised and discussed, followed by a consideration of flourishing as an ideal. I then introduce flourishing in the disciplines of positive psychology and positive education. This leads me to propose “contextlessness” as the primary criticism posed by this thesis with regard to existing positive psychological theories of flourishing. Finally, I present an overview of how the thesis attempts to address this problem, including justification of why education is selected as the context under investigation, and the specific phases of the research project.

### 1.2. The main argument

#### 1.2.1. What is flourishing?

To “flourish” is defined by The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1964) as to “grow vigorously; thrive, prosper, be successful; be in one’s prime” (p. 467). The term is derived from the Latin *flor*, meaning flower, which has its roots in the Proto-Indo-European *\*bhlo*, meaning to bloom. When people speak of flourishing colloquially, they usually use the term to connote something realising its potential (e.g. economically, developmentally, intellectually), growing, succeeding, or making some significant (usually positive) contribution to self or society. For example, one might say that the Chinese economy has flourished in the last 20 years, or that the baby, having been placed into a new foster home, is now flourishing. The colloquial connotations of flourishing have remained relatively consistent since the term entered the English language in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (The Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2013). In science, however, the term has been used somewhat more erratically, and I will return to this point in Chapter Three.

#### 1.2.2. Why flourishing?

In this section, I will introduce the “why” of flourishing. Why should we be interested in flourishing? Why should we seek to enhance our own and others’ potential to flourish? These are questions perhaps more in the realm of moral philosophy than of

science. Moreover, a detailed philosophical deconstruction of the reason(s) people should pursue flourishing is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, I will introduce here two of the major philosophical perspectives on flourishing: These are flourishing as a form of nature fulfilment and consequentialist perspectives on flourishing. I will then consider the notion that flourishing is an ideal, the assumption from which this thesis begins.

### **1.2.2.1. Flourishing as nature fulfilment**

Nature fulfilment perspectives relate to the notion that human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*,<sup>1,2</sup> is inextricably bound to individuals existing in a manner that is in accordance with their nature, which, for Aristotle (350BC/2000), was to be virtuous. As Lawrence (1993) points out, Aristotle identified two means of virtuous existence. The first, virtuous intellect, concerns the exercising of excellent thought or character, while the second is virtuous conduct, or acting virtuously. Although Aristotle defended the former as being superior, both were deemed to constitute virtue, and therefore capable of leading to a state of flourishing. When individuals lead a virtuous existence by either of these means, they fulfil their nature, thus leading to a virtuous society. When all individuals in society are virtuous, a state of societal flourishing emerges. Because virtue is in human nature, it is a “good” in its own right, and must therefore be pursued for its own sake rather than for any desirable consequences to which it might lead (Anscombe, 1958; Aristotle, 350BC/2000; Arneson, 1999; Hill, 1999). In this sense, flourishing has been referred to as a kind of moral “by-product” that results from virtuous pursuits, but is not itself especially pursued (Elster, 1981).

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<sup>1</sup> This term was, for a long time, translated from the Greek as meaning happiness. Ryff (1989) notes that, had the more accurate term, flourishing, been used, wellbeing research in the social sciences would no doubt have taken a different route from the one it did.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I do not use the psychological terms “hedonic” and “eudaimonic” interchangeably with the philosophical terms “subjective” and “objective,” respectively, in relation to theories of wellbeing. My distinction is, in short, that “hedonia” and “eudaimonia” refer to either the nature of goods or to the reason we pursue them, while “subjective” and “objective” refer to how the goods are identified – subjectively by the individual or objectively. So, if I refer to hedonic or eudaimonic theories I mean which type of goods we pursue in order to achieve wellbeing – goods pursued for pleasure, or which constitute pleasurable experiences in themselves, are characterised as hedonic, while those pursued for some moral end, or which are deemed to constitute a moral ideal regardless of whether they are pleasurable for the pursuer, are characterised as eudaimonic. Conversely, if I refer to subjective and objective theories I mean the way in which goods leading to or constituting wellbeing are identified – goods identified by the individual, or personally endorsed by her, as leading to or constituting wellbeing for herself, regardless of whether such goods might be endorsed in the same way by others, are characterised as subjective, while those identified by others (e.g. theorists, culture, government) as leading to or constituting wellbeing for all people, regardless of whether individuals themselves endorse these, are characterised as objective. Thus, in my view, theoretically, it is possible to propose both objective hedonic and subjective eudaimonic theories of wellbeing, despite that many extant theories tend to follow either the subjective-hedonic or objective-eudaimonic theoretical paradigms. However, I acknowledge other distinctions (or not) are also possible (e.g. de Ruyter, 2006; Younkins, 2008).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to the positioning of flourishing as a societal phenomenon, nature fulfilment perspectives have been influential in later socialist thought (e.g. Marx, 1959/1988; see also Leopold, 2007). Marx, for example, conceptualised flourishing as a kind of “emancipated society” similar to Aristotle’s notion of the virtuous society (Leopold, 2007), which could be attained through the virtuous conduct of citizens. However, Marxist interpretations of Aristotelian flourishing offer some additional theoretical components that build on Aristotle’s ideas on how virtuous existence comes about. The obvious example is Marx’s argument that greater societal virtue (and therefore flourishing) may be brought about by increasing economic equality through the minimisation of social hierarchy (Marx, 1959/1988). Marx also argued that virtuous conduct is brought about by the embodiment in each individual of an “abstract citizen” – a hypothetical internal entity which directs the person to reason and act virtuously (described in greater detail by Leopold, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

Although many theorists have advocated the nature fulfilment perspective as being a comprehensive and meaningful account of human flourishing (e.g. Rasmussen, 1999; Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008; Younkins, 2008), one criticism that has been made is its tendency to overplay the role of self-sacrifice. For example, speaking in the context of philosophy of education and teaching ethics, Higgins (2003) argues too much emphasis is placed on teachers’ moral duty to facilitate flourishing in their pupils, while self-cultivation of flourishing in the teacher is often neglected, leading to teacher burnout.

#### **1.2.2.2. Consequentialist perspectives on flourishing**

Consequentialist perspectives on flourishing are a major alternative to nature fulfilment ones and position flourishing as a desirable end, or consequence, of human action. These perspectives hold that flourishing is a desirable end in its own right and should therefore be pursued by whatever means enable this end to be reached, with less emphasis, compared with nature fulfilment perspectives, being placed on whether such means are inherently virtuous or morally justifiable. The foremost example of consequentialist perspectives is utilitarianism (e.g. Bentham, 1776/1988; Mill, 1950, Sidgwick, 1874/1907). Utilitarianism’s central tenet is that it is “...the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.” (Bentham quoted in Burns & Hart, 1977, p. 393). This principle is applied in many domains of society. For example, at elections or referendums in liberal democracies, a “majority

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of “abstract citizen” may be likened to Freud’s (1923/1949) “Superego”, Sartre’s (1948) “abstract man” [sic], or simply one’s conscience.

rules” tradition is followed, in which it is assumed that the political candidate or policy favoured by the majority of the electorate will have the greatest utility for the greatest number of people.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, there have been numerous criticisms of the approach. One of these is its insensitivity to injustice:

You are the law-enforcement officer in an isolated frontier town. A murder has been committed. Most people believe Bob is guilty, but you know he is innocent. Unless you hang Bob now, there will be a riot in town and several people will die. You are powerless to stop the riot by lawful means.

Utilitarianism says you must hang Bob. (Mulgan, 2010, p. 2).

Furthermore, similar to Higgins’ (2003) critique of nature fulfilment perspectives, utilitarianism can also fail to strike an appropriate balance between the wellbeing of the individual and the population:

You have ten dollars in your pocket. You could...see a movie, or give it to a reliable charity who will use it to restore someone’s sight. It’s pretty clear which produces more happiness. So you make the donation, and go to the cash machine to get money to go to the movies. But now you have ten dollars in your pocket. What should you do? You can see where this is going...No movies for you. (Mulgan, 2010, p. 2).

### **1.2.2.3. Juxtaposing nature fulfilment and consequentialist perspectives**

To illustrate the differences between nature fulfilment and consequentialist perspectives, Crisp (1997) asks whether Haydn<sup>5</sup> or an oyster would have the greater wellbeing. A eudaimonic account would indicate Haydn’s extraordinary masterpieces have served humanity such that some universal human need (say, for aesthetic beauty) has been fulfilled, and, therefore, his life may be considered flourishing despite his suffering since he has fulfilled his inherent nature to act virtuously. But “[s]upposing an oyster can have pleasant experiences,” observes Haybron (2008), “...then one could apparently be better off with an extremely long oyster life versus the normal-length life of Haydn, however fulfilling his life may have been.” (p. 23). Another example of the dilemma is when, in Homer’s *The Iliad* (1950/2003), Achilles is asked whether he would prefer to live long without fighting for King Agamemnon’s army to save Helen from Troy, or to die young but conquer Troy and forever live in the hearts of all men. He chooses the latter, and thus, the pleasantness of leading a long life without

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this does not necessarily mean this candidate or policy will in fact lead to the most widespread wellbeing simply because it has been subjectively endorsed by the majority of the electorate. Here, my point is that the utilitarian principle is often applied by tradition in Western societies, not the issue of whether wellbeing is determined subjectively or objectively.

<sup>5</sup> Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), the prominent Austrian composer of the Classical period, best known for works such as *Die Schöpfung* (The Creation) and *Die Jahreszeiten* (The Seasons). Whilst his musical work achieved critical acclaim, Haydn is known not to have led a very happy life, experiencing hunger and poverty during childhood, an unhappy marriage and employment instability in adulthood, and illness in old age (see Robbins Landon, 1976-80).

contributing to some morally valued goal is overridden by the virtuous act of conquering Troy, even if such an act has the unpleasant consequence of an untimely death.

#### **1.2.2.4. Flourishing as an ideal**

Regardless of whether a nature fulfilment or consequentialist (or indeed any other) philosophical justification of the pursuit of flourishing is adopted, to flourish may intuitively be considered in line with most societies' orientation towards progress and betterment of human life. Of course, it is necessary to recognise that the ways in which flourishing is interpreted, pursued, and practiced exhibits much variation across time and place (e.g. Christopher, 1999). Nevertheless, it could be argued that, despite this variation, most actions taken in the political, economic, social and other arenas of societies have, by and large, *aimed* to facilitate or enhance human flourishing in some way (for example, changes in healthcare policy, educational reform, etc. as brought about by governments, civic organisations and the like) and in this sense flourishing might be said to constitute an "ideal."<sup>6</sup> De Ruyter (2003) defines ideals as "...images of excellences that are not yet realised and... aims or goals we deeply desire to realise." (p. 468), and discusses the importance of ideals at length; for example, as a source of meaning in life and of motivation for actions (e.g. de Ruyter, 2003, 2004).

Three noteworthy criticisms of flourishing (or any good) as an ideal are proposed by Heyting (2004; in response to de Ruyter, 2003). In summary, these relate to:

- Whether or not ideals are realistically attainable;
- Whether or not people should strive to attain them; and
- Whether or not ideals can or should be "offered" to future generations (for example, in the context of education).

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<sup>6</sup> Whether such actions have actually succeeded in achieving flourishing is debatable. An obvious criticism of the view that flourishing is a social ideal is that the actions taken to achieve it are sometimes morally questionable (e.g. war, genocide, etc.) and this would raise the question of whether or not flourishing has a moral dimension. For example, de Ruyter (2004) suggests that Hitler could be considered to have flourished during the Nazi regime. Similarly, Seligman (2002, p. 303) argues a sadomasochist, a hit man, or an al-Qaeda terrorist may all flourish, regardless of the (im)moral dimensions of their actions. Although these persons may indeed be flourishing, I would argue this flourishing is of the subjectively determined kind (i.e. that the persons themselves would believe they are flourishing). Neither the nature fulfilment (section 1.2.2.1., pp. 2-3) nor the consequentialist perspective (section 1.2.2.2., pp. 3-4) seems likely to view these persons as flourishing. In the case of Hitler, for example, not more than a few people today would be likely to endorse his actions as being inherently virtuous, nor could it reasonably be said that his actions produced the greatest wellbeing for the greatest number of people. My position, therefore, is that flourishing may be better considered as having some form of moral dimension (de Ruyter, 2003).

Heyting (2004) argues that because ideals are “images of excellence,” or models of perfection, they cannot realistically be attained, and, therefore, that it is not worthwhile to attempt to attain them. Instead, she argues that people should strive to attain “goals,” which are realistically attainable, but are neither images of excellence nor models of perfection. With regard to the third criticism, Heyting notes the personal nature of ideals, suggesting that their transmission to, say, children should be tempered with regard for children’s agency in developing their own (interpretations of) ideals.

In this thesis, I begin with the initial assumption that human flourishing is a worthwhile good towards which people have, historically, tended to strive, and that in this sense it may be regarded as an ideal as defined by de Ruyter (2003). In considering Heyting’s (2004) critique of the conceptualisation of ideals, I add to this assumption that whilst flourishing may not be attainable in its “ultimate” form (see de Ruyter, 2003, for a distinction between attainable and unattainable ideals), it does not seem to make intuitive sense that the pursuit of smaller-scale, shorter-term, or otherwise less perfect goals could or should be conducted outside of the context of some overarching, guiding ideal to which one is committed.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, I maintain that it is still useful to regard flourishing as an ideal towards which people strive, and to consider and attempt to act upon or move towards this ideal in contextually appropriate ways.

Heyting’s (2004) third criticism, regarding the personal nature of (flourishing as) an ideal, is an interesting one. She contends, citing Bruner (1996), that we should not attempt to offer ideals to children because of the possibility that such transmission may in fact be an imposition, downplaying children’s need for autonomy in defining and pursuing their own selection of ideals. This problem arises from the variation in (the interpretation of) ideals across individuals, cultures, and historical eras. This point is largely relevant to the main argument of the thesis – which concerns the context-specific nature of flourishing – and my position on it is informed by a “relational” ontological perspective on flourishing. I do not deal with this here but will explain it further later in this chapter (section 1.2.6, pp. 18-20), and I will also return to it throughout subsequent chapters.

### **1.2.3. Flourishing in positive psychology**

In this thesis, I will draw on a significant volume of theory and research from the area of positive psychology – particularly positive psychological theories of flourishing – as this discipline focuses on the scientific study of human wellbeing. Therefore, it is useful

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<sup>7</sup> If goals are indeed pursued outside of the context of an ideal, the reasons for this seem to be limited to imposition, obligation, duress, or other circumstances outside of the individual’s control.

to introduce both positive psychology and positive psychological theories of flourishing here to “set the scene” for the critique of the theories I will later offer and how I will address the problem in later chapters. I will also attempt to justify basing the present work in positive psychology<sup>8</sup> by responding to some of the criticisms of the discipline.

### **1.2.3.1. Positive psychology**

Positive psychology may be broadly defined as the science of wellbeing – the psychological study of positive emotion (e.g. happiness, joy, contentment), positive character (e.g. kindness, optimism, resilience), and, to a lesser extent, positive institutions (e.g. family, community, civic organisations). Sheldon and King (2001) describe positive psychology as “the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” and note that it “...revisits the ‘average person,’ with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving.” (p. 216).

The inception of positive psychology in the late 1990s is commonly credited to Martin E.P. Seligman (e.g. Seligman, 1999, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), though it should be noted the discipline’s name, ontological and epistemological positions and its subject matter are not new. Shapiro (2001), for example, points out that Abraham Maslow discusses a study of human strength and virtue in a chapter entitled “Toward a Positive Psychology” in his book *Motivation and Personality* (Maslow, 1954). Positive psychology’s widespread adherence to empiricism also follows the traditions of mainstream 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology (e.g. Rowan, 2005). Furthermore, as several critics (e.g. Fernández-Ríos & Cornes, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2012, 2013 forthcoming; Lazarus, 2003) have noted, the study of wellbeing, happiness, strengths and virtues did not begin with positive psychology in the 2000s, but rather have been studied both empirically and otherwise in older disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and humanistic psychology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Although this thesis draws on much work from within positive psychology, I maintain no strict adherence to this discipline and will also frequently cite alternative or opposing points of view from other areas of psychology and social science (e.g. sociology, anthropology, economics). In so doing, I have intended to adopt a broad, “transdisciplinary” approach rather than one that is confined to a single narrow area.

<sup>9</sup> While I am on the subject of critiques of positive psychology, I also note that some of the discipline’s research has been criticised for apparent reductionism, logical inconsistencies and promotion of a uniform, over-positive personality type (e.g. Miller, 2008; Suissa, 2008). This thesis does not deal in detail with such general critiques of positive psychology, for two reasons. Firstly, as I mentioned in footnote 8, I do not myself claim to be a staunch advocate for traditional positive psychology. Second, following this, my thesis might in itself be considered a critical approach to some aspects of positive psychology. Therefore, I acknowledge the existence of such critiques and agree that their consideration within positive psychology may lead to a more “philosophically aware” science. I will attempt to incorporate awareness of some of these problematic issues into my discussions in later chapters.

Although many of the above criticisms are valid, some strengths of positive psychology should also be noted. For example, despite its tendency to put “old wine in new bottles” (Kristjánsson, 2012), positive psychology has produced a vast array of empirically grounded interventions which, when applied to people in real-life settings, reliably decrease depressive symptoms and increase wellbeing, often for extended time periods (e.g. Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Waters, 2011; I will review some of these in Chapter Two). The discipline has also served to bring together the modest range of wellbeing research existing within mainstream psychology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. that of Diener, Ryff, Bradburn, etc.) and led to a strong expansion in the generation of research focused on the positive aspects of psychological phenomena (e.g. mental health versus mental illness, positive emotion versus negative emotion, human strengths versus weaknesses; Seligman et al., 2005). In the last 15 years, researchers in positive psychology have also embarked on investigations of relatively novel topics such as positive aspects of time perspective (e.g. Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004), happiness economics, sociology, and public policy (e.g. Diener, Lucas, Schimmack & Helliwell, 2009; Layard, 2005; Veenhoven, 2008), and post-traumatic growth (e.g. Joseph & Linley, 2008). This work has complemented the large volume of psychological research which has focused on deficits and pathology during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Two criticisms of positive psychology particularly relevant to the premise of this thesis have come from within the discipline rather than outside it. These criticisms both relate to why human flourishing must receive greater attention as a topic of study within positive psychology.

Firstly, it has been argued that positive psychology is a theoretically incoherent discipline, lacking a central theme that binds its subject matter together. Sheldon (2004, 2009) has commented that “...a major stumbling block for the field is the lack of a unifying framework within which to conceptualize optimal functioning. In one sense, positive psychology is just a ‘grab-bag’ or ‘smorgasbord’ of phenomena and topics.” (2009, p. 268). This smorgasbord-like array of theory and research may create some difficulty in adequately defining positive psychology as a field, as it leaves much of its rapidly expanding work without an overarching purpose.

A second internal criticism of positive psychology is the overly narrow nature of happiness as a possible solution to the smorgasbord problem. In authentic happiness theory, Seligman’s (2002) seminal theory in positive psychology, authentic happiness is delineated into three types: the pleasant life (which follows the principles of traditional

hedonism), the good life (which follows desire theories – getting what one wants [Griffin, 1986]), and the meaningful life (which follows objective list theories, in which happiness can be attained through achievement of things on a list of objectively worthwhile goods or pursuits [e.g. Nussbaum, 1992; Sen, 1985]). Together, these three forms of happiness constitute authentic happiness. As Seligman (2011) notes, authentic happiness theory is somewhat narrow in focus. For example, its central construct, happiness, has too much emphasis on feeling and trying to maximise feeling a certain way (be it by pleasure, getting what one wants, or “ticking off” elements of a given objective list). This narrow focus on feeling has also been noted by critics from outside positive psychology (e.g. Smith, 2008). In addition, authentic happiness theory does not give due consideration to multiplicity or diversity in the forms of optimal states that people may achieve, of which happiness is merely one. In other words, it lacks multidimensionality in the factors that constitute or lead to optimal states, instead confining itself to happiness as a singular aim.

Seligman (2011) suggests in Well-Being Theory (discussed in the next section) that flourishing should be the topic of positive psychology, and that positive psychology’s overarching theme is understanding and enhancing human flourishing. Building on the above two gaps in the conception of positive psychology, human flourishing emerges as a more feasible central theme than happiness because it is conceptually broader, enabling consideration of multiple factors that may constitute or lead to it. As I noted earlier (section 1.2.2.4, pp. 5-7), this thesis begins with the assumption that flourishing is a worthwhile pursuit or ideal, and with its new focus on flourishing, positive psychology may re-orient its work to offer ways in which flourishing can be better understood and enhanced. There are already several theoretical perspectives on flourishing within positive psychology. I will turn to these next.

### **1.2.3.2. Positive psychological perspectives on flourishing**

In this section I will introduce three positive psychological perspectives on flourishing: Keyes’ (2002) mental health continuum, Diener’s (Diener, Wirts, Biswas-Diener, Tov, Kim-Prieto, Choi, et al., 2010) psychosocial prosperity, and Seligman’s (2011) well-being theory. Because numerous other theoretical perspectives on optimal states of wellbeing exist (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 1985; Maslow, 1943), it is necessary to offer some justification for selecting these three perspectives and not others. Firstly, the positive psychological perspectives concern flourishing as an optimal state or phenomenon (what flourishing is), while perspectives such as self-determination theory and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs are, as noted in their respective publications, theories of

motivation (what is necessary for flourishing). I acknowledge it could be argued that the nature of flourishing and the conditions for its emergence are interconnected. However, because I am interested more in the exploration of flourishing itself and how it can be measured and interconnected with other factors than in what conditions must be satisfied for flourishing to be possible, I will confine myself here to the three aforementioned perspectives. This is, however, with recognition that the excluded perspectives are also important for understanding forms of flourishing.

Introduction of the positive psychological perspectives on flourishing will lead me to my main criticism of them.

#### ***1.2.3.2.1. Flourishing as mental health***

The mental health perspective on flourishing posits that to flourish is a form of complete mental health which is distinct from the mere absence of mental disorder (Keyes, 2002, 2006). This model suggests that flourishing is located on a mental health continuum at the opposite end of diagnosable mental disorder. The majority of individuals fall along the middle of the continuum – they are either “moderately mentally healthy” (lacking a diagnosable mental disorder, but not possessing indicators of positive mental health either) or “languishing” (possessing symptoms of mental disorder such as depression or anxiety which are insufficiently severe to warrant clinical diagnosis). At one extreme of the continuum, a relatively small proportion of people have “flourishing mental health” (a lack of clinically diagnosable or subsyndromal mental disorder and possession of positive indicators of mental health, such as resilience and coping skills), whilst at the other end are sufferers of mental disorder (Keyes, 2002).

To be “diagnosed” with flourishing mental health, individuals must exhibit high scores on its three constituent components: psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), subjective wellbeing (Diener, 1984) and social wellbeing (Keyes, 1998). Psychological wellbeing refers to the satisfaction of six basic psychological needs (self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relations, autonomy) and differs from self-determination theory in that it is taken to constitute a form of optimal wellbeing, rather than a model of the conditions necessary for it. Subjective wellbeing refers to individuals’ emotional experience (positive and negative emotions) and cognitive evaluations (life satisfaction) of their lives. Social wellbeing may be defined as individuals’ perception of the quality of their relationships with others in their social network (e.g. friends, family, neighbours, communities). Measurement of each of these components was first proposed via a

purpose-designed scale (Keyes, 2002; see also Keyes, 2009a) but recently the same components have been mapped onto existing social survey items to determine the prevalence of flourishing mental health in European nations (Huppert & So, 2009, 2013).

#### ***1.2.3.2.2. Flourishing as psychosocial prosperity***

Diener and colleagues (Diener et al., 2010) characterise flourishing as a form of “psychosocial prosperity,” or generalised wellbeing arising from optimal individual and social conditions. Diener et al.’s unifactorial Flourishing Scale (2010) assesses psychosocial prosperity through eight items, which tap the central components of several prominent veins of wellbeing literature deemed important for flourishing, including satisfaction of psychological needs (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000), social capital (e.g. Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris & Huang, 2009), psychological capital (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), purpose and meaning (e.g. Seligman, 2002), prosocial behaviour (e.g. Dunn, Aknin & Norton, 2008) and optimism (Peterson, Seligman & Vaillant, 1988). Thus, this theoretical view conceives of flourishing as a general form of wellbeing constituted by a range of facets of wellbeing that are theoretically or empirically argued to be important for flourishing.

#### ***1.2.3.2.3. Well-being theory***

Turning away from authentic happiness theory (Seligman, 2002), which focused on happiness/hedonia as the central component of human wellbeing, Seligman (2011) proposes in Well-Being Theory that flourishing is a more complex, multi-faceted form of wellbeing. Seligman conceives of flourishing as a form of global or overall wellbeing emerging from five key elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. These elements are known as the “PERMA” model of flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Seligman proposes that none of the five elements define or constitute flourishing/wellbeing by themselves, but, instead, that they each contribute meaningfully to its attainment. Seligman justifies the five elements (as opposed to variations or other possible elements) by arguing that each of them is known to:

- Contribute (empirically) to flourishing;
- Be pursued by most people for its own sake, rather than as a means to some other end; and
- Be conceptually and psychometrically distinct from each of the other elements (i.e. be conceptualised and measured separately from the other elements and not overlap with them theoretically).

Well-being theory is relatively new as a theoretical perspective on flourishing and empirical work exploring its structure and assessment remains ongoing.

Introduction of each of the three major positive psychological perspectives above leads me to proposing my main criticism of them, the problem of contextlessness. I will discuss this next.

#### **1.2.4. Contextlessness**

Existing positive psychological theories of flourishing can be argued to be problematic in that they describe the construct only at a global level – flourishing across life domains, overall, and in general. This is fine if we want to assess an individual’s flourishing in general terms, but what about flourishing in specific life domains or cultural settings? In this case, assessment becomes difficult because existing theories do not offer a means of applying their conceptualisations of flourishing to specific life domains or cultural settings. Slife and Richardson (2008) argue this problem stems from the (implicit) utilisation of an “abstractionist” ontological perspective in such theories. In abstractionism, “*all* things, including the self, are the most real and the best understood when they are abstracted or separated from the situations in which they occur” (p. 701, emphasis in original; see also Slife, 2005). In the theories proposed by Keyes (2002), Diener et al. (2010) and Seligman (2011), flourishing is presented as a phenomenon detached, or detachable, from the myriad contexts in which it occurs – from the social, economic, and political contexts to the cultural and historical. For example, in Keyes’ (2002) flourishing mental health paradigm, the flourishing individual has high levels of self-reported psychological, subjective, and social wellbeing in general terms – one can say that this individual has a generally flourishing life. But what does this mean, for example, in an occupational setting, or in the domain of social relationships? Moreover, how do we know that all elements theorised to contribute to flourishing (say, the PERMA elements in Seligman’s Well-Being Theory) are all and equally important, or even applicable, to human flourishing in a particular context (Seligman does acknowledge this question to an extent; Seligman, 2011; see also Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern & Seligman, 2011)? Is a generally flourishing person with extremely high wellbeing in some domains or contexts and extremely low wellbeing in others equal to another generally flourishing person with similar levels of wellbeing across the same domains or contexts?<sup>10</sup> As Slife and Richardson (2008)

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<sup>10</sup> A similar issue has been vigorously debated in the area of intelligence testing for decades – there, the question has been whether there is any pragmatic use for the measurement of a *general* intelligence factor

argue, whilst positive psychological theories advocate certain traits or qualities argued to constitute and/or enhance human flourishing, they do so without *contextualising* the phenomenon of flourishing in any concrete, applied setting, such as “...pitching a baseball, performing surgery, or deciding to go to war.” (p. 716). In this thesis, I will refer to the problem posed by abstractionism – disregarding contexts when considering flourishing – as “contextlessness.” In this section, I will first point out some caveats regarding contextlessness, and then propose and review three aspects of contextlessness which I will focus upon throughout this thesis.

#### **1.2.4.1. Caveats on contextlessness**

Before I proceed to discuss the problem of contextlessness, it is necessary to note that some researchers within positive psychology have acknowledged aspects of contextlessness or demonstrated some awareness of it in their work. For example, in their paper on conceptualising positive health as a product of dynamic, integrated mind-body influences rather than mutually exclusive mental health and physical health, Ryff and Singer (1998) acknowledge that positive health is practiced differently across cultural contexts (e.g. for reasons of cultural norms or values or differences in cultural understandings of health and wellbeing). They discuss the example of how health and wellbeing are understood and practiced in collectivistic African cultures. There, the wellbeing people strive for is characterised by the “preservation and promotion of community” (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p. 6). Those lower in the social hierarchy respect and serve those higher, while those higher advise and protect those lower within the context of reciprocal, community-oriented relationships (Mbiti, 1970; Paris, 1995). Although Ryff and Singer recognise the difference evident in African practice of wellbeing in contrast to the more individualistic practice in Western cultures, they conclude that the variations can still be reduced to core commonalities between contexts.

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which obscures diversity in individuals’ scores on a variety of *specific* forms of intelligence. The notion of a “g” (general) factor in intelligence was first proposed by Charles Spearman (1904, 1923) using evidence from factor analytic studies of scores on mental ability tests. Modern-day proponents of g factor theory include Jensen (1998) and Carroll (1993), who argue that although context-specific manifestations of diverse forms of intelligence may exist, these can always be reduced to a single, superordinate g factor of intelligence or mental ability. Though factor analytic studies such as these do show a statistically derived g factor, critics of the perspective have argued that such a g factor is not meaningful or useful to practitioners in applied settings such as schools. Howard Gardner (1983, 1993), for example, argues strongly against using a single g factor score to assess and manage the learning of schoolchildren as it obscures the manifestation in children of diverse and uniquely expressed forms of intelligence (including both traditional forms of intelligence such as linguistic and logical-mathematical and more specialised ones, such as kinetic, musical, and existential intelligences). Similarly, Sternberg (1985) argues that the use of intelligence depends on the nature of the context in which it is applied, and therefore attempting to use a g factor in practice is not useful.

In another vein, Biswas-Diener (2011) notes, in a review of progress in applied domains of positive psychology, that much research in positive psychological interventions<sup>11</sup> is still laboratory-based (e.g. Seligman et al., 2005), or, for those interventions applied in the field, it fails to adequately consider contextual (“personal and situational” [Biswas-Diener, 2011, p. 25]) factors. For example, Sin, Della Porta and Lyubomirsky (2011) suggest that factors such as the duration of interventions, continued practice, person-activity fit, and motivation may account for variability in the success of interventions, and these factors are not generally considered in experimental studies. Also, some positive psychological concepts, such as “character strengths” (discussed in Chapter Two) have been argued to be better understood when considered within the contexts in which they are developed and employed (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan & Minhas, 2011). Linley (2008) argues that individuals should tailor the application of their character strengths to the features and demands of the context in which they find themselves, as contexts may call for strengths to be employed (or not) in specific ways. Biswas-Diener (2011) concludes that it cannot be assumed positive psychological research can be applied to practice in a “one size fits all” (p. 6) manner. However, he stops short of mentioning cultural contexts (e.g. national cultures, professional cultures) and their potential influence in the ways wellbeing and wellbeing interventions may be interpreted and practiced.

Some further recognition of contextlessness in positive psychology comes from advocates of systems theories of wellbeing. Walker and Prilleltensky (2010) comment that a “systems approach” in positive psychology would allow phenomena to be viewed as products of the influences between multiple parts of a system (e.g. the self, family, social networks and communities, and culture) rather than in the individualistic manner which is currently mainstream. More recently, La Placa, McNaught and Knight (2013; Knight & McNaught, 2011) have proposed their own ecological systems theory for wellbeing which recognises wellbeing as emerging under the complex influences of micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors, much the same as the perspective on child/lifespan development in developmental and ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992; Sameroff, 1983).

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<sup>11</sup> Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) are intervention programmes which comprise activities empirically demonstrated to increase wellbeing. These can be applied to both healthy and clinical populations (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Waters, 2011).

The above examples should be taken as a caveat that positive psychology is not entirely devoid of recognition of context, though in my critique I will argue that this recognition is insufficient for meaningful research and practice within the discipline.

The “contextless” nature of prevailing positive psychological theories of flourishing may be considered and deconstructed in a variety of ways. Here, I identify three distinct aspects of said theories in which I will argue contextlessness is problematic, although I acknowledge other aspects may also be proposed. The three aspects of contextlessness critiqued and addressed in this thesis are as follows:

#### **1.2.4.2. Contextless conceptualisation**

Prevailing theories conceptualise the construct of human flourishing using terms and constructs just as abstracted from any given context(s) as flourishing itself, meaning it is difficult to derive from them a definition of what is meant by flourishing in any concrete, applied context. For example, Seligman (2011) identifies positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment as the constituent components of flourishing. What does, say, positive emotion mean in the context of a wedding? Does it have the same meaning at a funeral, or a different one? If the meaning is different, how meaningful is it to insist that these different meanings can or should be reduced to a single, generic positive emotion, like the g factor of intelligence? I will discuss and present work attempting to address the problem of contextless conceptualisation in Chapter Three.

#### **1.2.4.3. Contextless measurement**

Following on from contextlessness in definitions and conceptualisations of flourishing, prevailing theoretical perspectives present tools (questionnaires, scales) that measure flourishing in general terms, without reference to context. Because the measurement of flourishing is without context, the tools yield for each individual only scores which represent his or her general flourishing, or flourishing across any given number of life domains or other contexts. Similar to the challenges posed by measurement of general intelligence, I would argue it is questionable how theoretically meaningful, or indeed useful, such generic scores might be, particularly when they are used to carry out and evaluate applied intervention programmes (such as on students in educational settings), where individuals’ flourishing may arguably be taken to depend on, and be defined by, the context in which they are flourishing. I will return to contextless measurement in Chapter Four.

#### **1.2.4.4. Relationships with other contexts**

Apart from neglecting to develop conceptualisations of what flourishing means in applied contexts, extant theoretical perspectives also tend not to consider ways in which co-occurring contexts (or overlapping ones) may produce diverse and unique variants of flourishing different from general flourishing and from flourishing in a single context. Because all flourishing (and indeed all human experience) occurs in a myriad of co-occurring, overlapping contexts which influence one another in complex ways, it must be defined and measured with reference not to just one context, but an array of other contexts relevant to the individual's flourishing in the context of interest. For example, if one is considering flourishing in the context of education (as I will in this thesis), it should also be useful to consider flourishing in the contexts of, say, political and economic changes that are affecting the education sector at any given period in time. The education sector, together with its political, economic, and other contexts come together to form what might be called a "supercontext," or inter-twined myriad of contexts, in which flourishing might be considered. I will consider the issue of flourishing in relation to other contexts in Chapter Five.

### **1.2.5. Why is contextlessness a problem?**

Contextlessness makes it difficult to understand, measure, and otherwise research human flourishing because extant theories do not readily lend themselves to the development of rich, detailed, and context-embedded conceptualisations of what human flourishing is and how it can be evaluated in applied contexts. However, this seems insufficient as an explanation of why I am suggesting contextlessness is a problem in need of rectification, both in theoretical perspectives on flourishing and in positive psychology in general. Therefore, I will attempt to elaborate on this a little more before I move on to considering alternatives to the abstractionist ontology (Slife & Richardson, 2008) that produces contextlessness.

Theory development is important as a component of intellectual endeavour in its own right – for example, in terms of establishing and updating the conceptual frameworks we use to think about ideas, themes, systems etc. in any given discipline. Numerous theorists have commented on this importance and suggested methods of theory development from across the social sciences (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; George & Bennett, 2005). However, there seems to be agreement across many areas of the social sciences that it is equally important that theory be bridged with practice so that practitioners (e.g. psychotherapists, teachers, healthcare workers) can effectively apply theoretical knowledge in the field (e.g. Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; L'Abate & Cusinato, 2007; Poland, Green & Rootman, 2000).

Given the need for links between theory and practice, it seems plausible to suggest that just as those applying theory to practice should be appropriately knowledgeable about the theory, so too should the theory be informed by the specific nuances (or “quirks”) of the context to which it is being applied. I argue this because theories developed in isolation from the context in which they are intended to be applied often fail to be applied successfully due to a lack of information on how the theory is received and implemented in the context alongside the myriad other factors at play in that context. An example will serve to clarify this. Wang (2008) investigated teachers’ perceptions of language policy implementation in Chinese higher education. In China, language policy dictates that teachers in tertiary education must adhere closely to government-prescribed English language textbooks to ensure students reach the relevant level of proficiency (either advanced, for students involved in English language studies, or intermediate, for students involved in other disciplines). Using observations of classroom lessons at a university in Xi’an, Shaanxi province, Wang noted that discrepancies were apparent between policy requirements and actual teaching and learning practice in the classroom. In two detailed follow-up interviews with teachers, it emerged that reasons for engagement in practice diverging from that prescribed by policy were primarily related to factors such as large class sizes, students’ prior level of language proficiency, student and teacher motivation, and institutional evaluation mechanisms used to check teachers’ implementation of the policy. For example, the government had required teachers to be knowledgeable about and strictly implement a particular updated version of a language syllabus. However, teachers explained that they were not interested in studying or implementing the syllabus because of its excessive emphasis on passive (e.g. reading, listening) rather than active (e.g. writing, speaking) language skills – a limitation which was, in their view, not useful for meeting the needs of students (see also Silver & Skuja-Steele, 2005).

In this example, had the policy been formulated with greater awareness and acceptance of the nuances of teaching practice in higher education, it seems that it may have been implemented with greater success. Indeed, it might be said that practitioners are often left confused and/or disillusioned with theories or policies that may be imposed on them by theorists or policymakers who have not given due consideration to contextual constraints and limitations that may affect the implementation of such theories or policies. It is not uncommon, for example, for politicians to be criticised for ‘being out of touch’ with certain parts of society for precisely this reason (e.g. Morris, 2012; Stohlberg, 2008). Thus, abstractionist ontological perspectives (Slife &

Richardson, 2008) and the problem of contextlessness to which they lead present a challenge when the theory in which they are employed is applied in practice. For meaningful (not just statistical) success in application, theories must be appropriately informed by practice (i.e. they must be contextualised, or context-specific), just as practitioners must be adequately informed by the theory being applied. As Slife and Richardson (2008) argue, “[g]ood theory...is not first reasoned abstractly and then subsequently applied to a concrete context. Good theory is an outgrowth of the relations among the particulars and practices of that context” (p. 704).

### **1.2.6. Alternatives to contextlessness**

Having shown why contextlessness is problematic, I will now consider possibilities for its rectification. What alternatives are there to the problem of contextlessness and to the abstractionist ontological stance that gives rise to it? When discussing the notion of flourishing as an ideal earlier in this chapter (section 1.2.2.4, pp. 5-7), I noted Heyting’s (2004) argument that ideals are personal in nature and therefore cannot usefully be “offered” to children in schools, and mentioned then that my position on this is relational. I will elaborate on this position here.

Instead of positioning a theory in positive psychology (say, a flourishing theory) in some abstracted reality isolated from contextual details, one could adopt the opposite position and employ the understanding that since contexts are entirely unique in the particular factors that constitute them, each context must have applied to it a unique theory developed specifically for that context, and no theory is necessarily any more universally applicable than another. In this way, a theory could be presumed to have a high level of “fit” with the context of application because it would have been developed specifically in and for that context, thus avoiding the theory-context discrepancies emerging from the application of abstractionist theories. There are at least three problems with adopting such an approach. Firstly, when one has an extreme context-specific theory, one would be faced with the impracticality of having to develop new theories for every context encountered. One would then be obliged to develop infinite number of theories for application to infinite number of possible contexts. Defence of such an extreme context-specific position – what might be called a kind of pure relativism – seems impractical if one wishes to develop theories specifically for application to contexts. Second, in some cases extreme relativism can give rise to moral problems and injustice. For example, given that each theory is valid in its own context and no more universal than any other, one could conceivably argue that a rapist’s account of events is just as valid as that of the victim. A third problem is that relativism

holds that all truths are valid only in their respective contexts – a principle which is in itself abstracted and universal, making the position at odds with its central principle.

Slife and Richardson (2008) suggest a feasible alternative to both abstractionism and relativism – the relational ontological perspective. This is a “middle theory” of sorts that advocates some general/universal “truths” (e.g. theories, policies), but emphasises that these truths can be best understood when considered in the context in which they occur, because truths manifest in context-specific ways (i.e. truths are derived from the relations they have with their context). Consider the example of a hammer. Slife and Richardson point out that although one would almost invariably recognise a hammer in any context (in a toolbox, on a pile of papers, hanging on the wall in a museum), one could also recognise that it is not necessarily always “the same” hammer in every context – that is, in a toolbox it is a tool (its traditional role), on a pile of papers it may be a paperweight, and in the museum a piece of art. In this case, although the hammer maintains some of its characteristics across contexts (e.g. its appearance), it also takes on unique characteristics in particular contexts (e.g. aesthetic quality as a piece of art). If one adopts this form of relational perspective, it seems that one can avoid both the impracticality of abstractionism and the excessive specificity, moral problems, and self-contradictory nature of relativism.

Returning to the issue of flourishing as an ideal (De Ruyter, 2003, 2004; Heyting, 2004), I would argue that, following the relational perspective advocated by Slife and Richardson, human flourishing may be considered a worthwhile ideal universally, but its specific interpretation and manner of pursuit is dependent upon context (e.g. individual characteristics, life domain, culture, historical era). Such a relational perspective is by no means new; it has been advocated by numerous theorists in both philosophy and psychology, although the specific term “relational” is not always explicitly used (e.g. Burack, Blidner, Flores & Fitch, 2007; De Ruyter, 2004; Rasmussen, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Younkins, 2008). In this thesis, I place emphasis on the utility of understandings of flourishing at the contextual level because these, as suggested by examples such as Wang (2008), have greater potential than abstracted understandings to be meaningfully applied to practice. Furthermore, a relational perspective does not preclude the inclusion of flourishing as an ideal in educational practice because it has the ability to present flourishing as a generic good whilst enabling flexibility for its contextualisation in individual persons and their social, cultural and historical contexts.

There is one further problem, however: Adoption of a relational perspective affirms acknowledgement of the context-specific nature of flourishing, but it is unable to characterise the specific nature of flourishing in any particular context – such as education. For this, one needs to conduct context-level explorations of flourishing. This leads me to the present thesis.

### **1.3. This thesis**

#### **1.3.1. The research issue**

In this thesis I will argue that the problem of contextlessness – including its implications for practice – manifest in the domain of education just as in any other given context, and will attempt to help address this problem by exploring flourishing in education in more detail than has previously been done. Specifically, I will consider this issue within positive psychological practice in education, a field known as “positive education.”

Briefly, positive education may be defined as positive psychological theory applied to children and youth in educational settings with the aim of protecting them against risk factors for mental disorder and distress and enhancing their flourishing (e.g. Green, Oades & Robinson, 2011). Strictly speaking, positive education predates the inception of positive psychology because its “flagship” school-based wellbeing programme, the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), was first developed in the 1980s (Gillham, Jaycox, Reivich, Seligman & Silver, 1990). The PRP aims to increase students’ wellbeing at and outside school by promoting resilience-enhancing thinking and coping skills and optimism, and its effectiveness has been widely empirically affirmed (e.g. Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008). With the advent of positive psychology as a unified discipline, other existing positive education programmes were brought together and new ones developed and implemented (see Waters, 2011).

In this thesis I will argue that, in principle, positive education programmes are well-founded in terms of what they seek to achieve, acting as buffers against increasing rates of mental disorder and distress in school-aged children (e.g. Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts & Seeley, 1993); however, positive education theory and practice have tended to follow and replicate many of the same problematic philosophical assumptions as positive psychology when applying the discipline’s theoretical concepts and frameworks in schools (e.g. Walker & Prilleltensky, 2010). For example, I will argue that many positive education programmes are implemented and assessed using primarily top-down, empirical approaches which, although useful for showing statistical changes in psychometrically measured wellbeing, are unable to tap into the specific nature of that wellbeing in the context of students and teachers operating in interaction

in the classroom, and of wider cultural and historical factors that influence those interactions. In this sense, there are aspects of both specific positive education programmes and positive education in general that have potential for improvement, for instance in terms of the conceptual and methodological frameworks and strategies they employ in practice and the underlying philosophical assumptions that give rise to these.

My critique of positive education initiatives and of the area in general comprises three parts which correspond to the three areas of contextlessness I proposed earlier (section 1.2.4, pp. 12-16); these are contextless conceptualisation of flourishing, contextless measurement of flourishing, and neglect of wider contextual factors that implicate flourishing in education. Elsewhere (Chapter Two) I will review this critique in greater depth.

Thus, the research issue which I will attempt to address in this thesis concerns the critique of extant positive psychological perspectives on human flourishing for their contextlessness, and, specifically, the emergence of contextlessness in the applied area of positive education and the implications of this for positive educational practice. I will attempt to address this issue by presenting a series of preliminary exploratory research studies focusing on the contextual meaning, measurement, and wider political and economic implications of flourishing in education.

### **1.3.2. Justifying the context**

Until this point, I have referred to the notion of flourishing within the context of education in general. I must point out here that in my thesis I will explore flourishing specifically in the context of *higher* education, rather than other levels of education. Some justification of this is required.

The vast majority of theory, research and application in positive education is in relation to compulsory-level education – primary and secondary school – and targets school-aged children and youth (e.g. Waters, 2011). Relative to this, positive education initiatives aiming to enhance wellbeing or flourishing at higher education level are almost non-existent, though those that are available will be introduced here, and discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

The decision to direct preliminary theory development work towards flourishing in higher education, as opposed to primary or secondary school, was taken on the basis of two reasons. Firstly, there is a need to extend positive education theory, research and application into the area of higher education in order to address the lack of work at this level of education relative to schools. Positive psychology has had a strong impact in higher education within a number of specialist courses including the Master of Applied

Positive Psychology (MAPP) programmes at the Universities of Pennsylvania, US, and East London, UK, and other courses run at a range of universities across the US, UK and elsewhere (e.g. Russo-Netzer & Ben-Shahar, 2011). However, because these are stand-alone courses teaching a general positive psychology curriculum, they benefit only students enrolled on the courses themselves and fail to reach the wider student body. In other words, there is currently no institution-wide positive education programme for universities, though a number of theoretical commentaries have appeared based on existing abstractionist flourishing theories (e.g. Seligman, 2011) that try to envision what a “positive university” may look like (e.g. Oades, Robinson, Green & Spence, 2011; Schreiner, Hulme, Hetzel & Lopez, 2009). These commentaries tend to apply principles of extant flourishing and other wellbeing theories to the higher education context in a top-down fashion, that is, on the assumption that the theories will “work” in higher education regardless of its contextual idiosyncrasies, and are therefore somewhat antithetical to the inductive approach adopted in this thesis. I will return to Oades et al. (2011) and Schreiner et al. (2009) in Chapter Two.

The second reason higher education was selected as the focus of the present thesis was because university students are increasingly an at-risk population for mental health problems. University students have commonly been reported to suffer depressive and anxiety disorders and psychological distress, with prevalence rates consistently higher than in the general population (e.g. Dyrbye, Thomas & Shanafelt, 2006). For example, 19% of university students in Australia are estimated to have mental health difficulties, while up to 67% report subsyndromal levels of distress (Stallman, 2010). A similar picture is observed in the US (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein & Hefner, 2007), in longitudinal studies (e.g. Rimmer, Halikas & Schuckit, 1982), and in non-Western populations (e.g. Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Depression and psychological distress in university students are associated with poor problem-solving skills (Gotlib & Asarnow, 1979), procrastination (Saddler & Sacks, 1993), and loneliness and isolation (Westefeld & Furr, 1987). As such, contextualised knowledge of flourishing in higher education may aid the development of context-specific positive education programmes and other wellbeing initiatives for university students in a similar vein to those developed for schools (Seligman et al, 2009; Waters, 2011).

### **1.3.3. Aims of the project**

The project reported in this thesis was comprised of three distinct, successive phases in which the three areas of contextlessness were explored. Each of these are summarised below.

### **1.3.3.1. Understanding flourishing in the context of higher education**

This phase aimed to develop a context-specific, socioculturally constructed understanding of the concept of flourishing in education using an inductive content analytic approach (see Chapter Three)

### **1.3.3.2. Measuring flourishing in the context of higher education**

In this phase, my aim was to develop and initially validate a measurement tool, based on the understandings derived in the work mentioned in section 1.3.3.1 above, to psychometrically assess the construct of flourishing in education (see Chapter Four).

### **1.3.3.3. Contextualising flourishing among other factors influencing higher education**

This phase was primarily comprised of exploration of the prevalence of flourishing, as measured by the scale mentioned in section 1.3.3.2 above, in a sample of students in the context of a variety of ongoing socioeconomic and political changes in the education sector, including issues of student attitudes, student finance and debt, political behaviour, and political attitudes (see Chapter Five).

## **1.3.4. Scope of the project**

Completion of the above three phases of work was anticipated to be able to contribute to addressing the three key areas of contextlessness I proposed and discussed earlier, leading to my proposal of a preliminary theory of flourishing in higher education (discussed in Chapter Six). Whilst this resultant theory provides considerable insight into the contextualisation of flourishing in this setting, it is necessary to note several points that I do not seek to achieve in this work. Firstly, I do not seek to propose a theory of flourishing that is somehow applicable to all conceivable contexts or even to all areas of education (e.g. education across diverse cultural settings, across historical eras, etc.). Rather, the theory I do propose was derived from an understanding of flourishing in education within the context of a UK cultural setting, and the present-day historical era, and its “generalisability” may therefore be considered limited by these boundaries.

A second point worth mentioning is that I do not seek to “invalidate” existing positive psychological theories of flourishing. The preliminary context-specific theory of flourishing I offer in this thesis is intended to offer an alternative view of the phenomenon of flourishing in an applied setting by adopting a bottom-up approach to understanding it. I will argue this sort of theoretical “depth” within a specialised domain is complementary, rather than contradictory, to the theoretical breadth of existing theories of flourishing and that in synthesis these can contribute to a more detailed and inclusive understanding of human flourishing in the context of education.

A third point regarding the project's scope is that though numerous public policies relating to the education sector have been proposed and implemented in the UK (see Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004), in this thesis, primarily in Chapter Five, I seek to evaluate the influence of the 2012-13 rise in tuition fee caps for UK and European students in England (Bolton, 2012) on student flourishing. In addition, my evaluation of this policy remains exploratory given both the bottom-up approach adopted throughout the thesis work and also the absence of a control group or longitudinal data on student flourishing collected both before and after the change in policy. As such, I seek to make only tentative suggestions as to the possible influences of the change in policy over student flourishing and to possibilities for re-orienting future policy in this area towards a greater focus on flourishing as a desirable ideal in the education sector.

A final issue regarding the project's scope is that whilst one of the avenues of utilisation that could be pursued with this thesis is the development and implementation of a context-specific positive education programme for flourishing in universities, in the present thesis I did not seek to create such a programme as my focus was on exploration of the construct of flourishing and preliminary theory development rather than on application. However, I do discuss (in Chapter Six) suggestions for utilisation of the present work in the development of context-specific flourishing-oriented positive education programmes in the future.

### **1.3.5. Novelty, relevance, and pragmatic utility**

In this section I will highlight and briefly discuss several aspects of the work presented in this thesis that are novel in relation to existing literature on human flourishing and that add material to existing knowledge such that it may be utilised by future research and application in both positive psychology and positive education. Specifically, there are three areas in which I propose this: A context-specific theory of flourishing, novelty in approach, and the Scale of Flourishing in Academia (SOFIA).

#### **1.3.5.1. A context-specific theory of flourishing**

As discussed throughout this chapter, there is currently no theory of flourishing within positive psychology that is context-specific. Instead, prevailing theories are inherently contextless, and this poses a number of challenges in their application to concrete situations such as the classroom learning environment. Thus, the preliminary theory of flourishing proposed in this thesis is novel in that it was developed specifically to address flourishing as a context-specific phenomenon, and therefore provides more in-depth insight into the phenomenon in this setting than prevailing theories are able to offer.

### **1.3.5.2. Novelty in approach**

The thesis' general ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches depart somewhat from the way in which other theories of flourishing were developed. Such theories were derived primarily via existing literature on wellbeing and almost exclusively follow the top-down quantitative-empirical approach deemed appropriate for positive psychological inquiry (see, for example, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). The defence of this approach at the exclusion of alternative (primarily bottom-up) approaches that adopt philosophical assumptions other than, say, abstractionism or empiricism has meant the use of qualitative-constructivist approaches in positive psychological theory development has remained limited (e.g. Held, 2004; Taylor, 2001). As a result of this, existing theories of flourishing tend to lack many of the richer understandings of wellbeing-in-context that qualitative-constructivist approaches are able to offer (e.g. Christopher, 1999). Thus, adoption of this "outlawed" alternative approach to the present research was hoped to add theoretical depth in one area of human flourishing (higher education) whilst simultaneously demonstrating that positive psychological inquiry into human wellbeing is meaningfully possible through approaches other than the traditional quantitative-empirical one.

### **1.3.5.3. The Scale of Flourishing in Academia (SOFIA)**

Although the development of the SOFIA reported in Chapter Four forms part of the preliminary theory development planned as the wider aim of the thesis, the scale has potential to be developed further as a psychometric measurement tool for the construct of flourishing in higher education settings (for example, through further exploration of its factorial structure, construct validity, application and adaptation to other cultural settings, and standardisation within cultural settings and other groups; see Chapter Four for a more comprehensive discussion). As such, the tool could be used independently for purposes such as positive psychological programme/intervention evaluation or to evaluate flourishing in the context of wider policy changes in the sector (as was done in Chapter Five).

## **1.3.6. Acknowledging the context of the thesis**

Given the nature of the topic of this thesis it is necessary to acknowledge the contexts in which the work for it was carried out and written. Here, I will acknowledge two aspects of the thesis' context: the political context and the personal context.

### **1.3.6.1. The political context**

In contrast to research carried out retrospectively, this thesis was prepared during a time when its subject matter was, and remains, in a state of constant change. Following the

formation of the present coalition government between the UK Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in May 2010, a series of policy changes began to take place which financially and economically affected a range of public and private sector services operating in the country (e.g. HM Treasury, 2010). These changes included the 2012-13 increase in tuition fee caps for UK and European undergraduate students in England, discussed further in Chapter Five, which led to widespread political protests by students across the country (e.g. Vasagar, Lewis & Watt, 2010). These and other current affairs were at least somewhat influential in the making of decisions regarding the direction the present research took, particularly in Chapter Five. The decision to explore human flourishing in the context of the new tuition fee policy was hoped to make the overall project a timely and relevant contribution to our understanding of flourishing-in-context by taking into consideration the way flourishing is or is not occurring in the “here and now.”

#### **1.3.6.2. The personal context**

Finlay (2002, 2003) argues that, particularly within qualitative research, an effort to reflect critically on one’s own role in the research as a researcher can contribute to increasing overall quality and trustworthiness of the research. This critical reflection is known as “reflexivity” (Finlay, 2002). Although only the first phase of the work presented in this thesis is qualitative (see Chapter Three), it is still useful to offer some consideration of personal characteristics and circumstances that are likely to have shaped my interest in and approach to this thesis’ subject matter.

One pertinent factor in my interest in education is my experience of several school types and education systems. I began my education at a private co-educational Catholic primary school in suburban Melbourne and later studied at a secular state high school, also in Melbourne. I was also home-schooled (or, more accurately, “road-schooled”) in a year of my primary education when I backpacked Europe. I have variously attended state urban and rural primary and secondary schools in and around Izmir, and more recently two former-polytechnic state universities in Luton and London. My experience of these institutions is not, of course, a comprehensive representation of the diversity that exists in educational systems and traditions across the world. It has, though, contributed to a tendency to feel “acculturated” to all of them, and therefore to feel able to reflect on the strengths and limitations of each. It may be worth mentioning that I have been in continuous full time education for 19 years and since the age of four. The uninterrupted nature of this education has meant being a student and learner has been, and still is, an integral dimension of my identity. During

my education, to the present day, I would evaluate my experience as having flourished; though what I mean by this is a personal evaluation and not necessarily related to the nature of flourishing I will discuss in this thesis. My evaluation of myself as having flourished may enable me to better understand other students' ideations of flourishing than, for example, the experiences of students who have disliked or struggled through their education.

It is useful also to reflect on my personal political outlook. Whilst conducting and writing about the research reported in Chapter Five, I did not actively attempt to apply biases that reflected my own political stance, nor, in retrospect, would I judge the methodological approach or selection of variables to have been particularly one-sided. I tend to hold broadly leftist libertarian views however I am neither formally nor informally affiliated with any major political party and instead favour grassroots and non-governmental approaches to social change. This view may have contributed to my interest in students' own conceptualisations of flourishing (see Chapter Three) as opposed to a conceptualisation governmental or other institutions may impose upon them.

### **1.3.7. Thesis structure**

Following the general introduction to the thesis given in this chapter, Chapter Two contains a review of the literature on the positive education movement, discussing in greater detail the challenges posed by contextlessness and abstractionist ontology in both compulsory- and post-compulsory levels of education. In Chapter Three, I report and review the first study conducted for the project, which involved addressing the problem of contextless conceptualisation by developing a socially constructed conceptualisation of what flourishing means for students in the context of present-day UK higher education. Chapter Four focuses on the development and initial validation of the SOFIA, aiming to address the issue of contextless measurement in the implementation and evaluation of positive education programmes. In Chapter Five, I take the SOFIA "into the field" to conduct exploratory investigations of patterns and trends in context-specific flourishing in relation to university students' consumerist and political attitudes, political behaviour, and socioeconomic circumstances that arise in the wider context of ongoing policy change in the sector (Bolton, 2012). Finally, Chapter Six presents general discussion on the project, including proposal of the preliminary flourishing theory, strengths and limitations, and suggestions for future research, application, and public policy in the area of higher education.

## CHAPTER TWO

# CONTEXTLESSNESS IN APPLICATION: A REVIEW OF THE POSITIVE EDUCATION MOVEMENT

### 2.1. Abstract

As noted in Chapter One, positive education is an applied field of positive psychology which aims to enhance human flourishing within educational settings through the application of positive psychological theory. My aim in this chapter is to review the theory and practice of positive education and demonstrate how the problem of abstractionism/contextlessness emerges in this applied domain. This is important to the overall thesis because, as I argued in Chapter One, contextlessness can have particularly significant ramifications for theories when they are applied to practice, and I will attempt to show that some important questions about student flourishing remain unanswered because of the abstractionism applied within positive education. I will begin this chapter with a detailed introduction to the field of positive education, including a justification for why I elected to review this field as opposed to others, and an explanation of the field's definition, rationale, and aims. Following this, I will review the array of positive education initiatives that currently exist in compulsory-level education (schools) and post-compulsory-level education (universities), including assessments of their effectiveness. This will lead me back to the critique of contextlessness in positive psychological theory I presented in Chapter One, and I will expand on this critique as it pertains to the positive education initiatives reviewed.

### 2.2. Introduction to positive education

#### 2.2.1. Justification for reviewing positive education

When I refer to “flourishing-in-context” in this thesis, the context I am concerned with is education, and, specifically, higher education. I discussed my reasons for investigating flourishing in this context in Chapter One. In the present chapter, my review of the literature will be focused upon positive education (the application of positive psychology to education; see section 2.2.2 overleaf) and the current state of flourishing- and wellbeing-oriented pursuits in schools and universities. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that positive education is neither the first nor the only tradition that has aimed to help students flourish. Precedents to positive education have

been mostly in the area of pedagogy, in which numerous theoretical perspectives have argued for changes in what and how students are taught or helped to learn in educational settings (see, for example, Illeris, 2009). Noteworthy examples of these include:

- Paulo Freire's (1970/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which positions flourishing as individuals' "emancipation" or "liberation" from social or political oppression perpetuated by educative systems;
- Maria Montessori's (1946/1989, 1948/1989) self-discovery oriented "Montessori method"; and
- The wider tradition of liberal education, which was developed as a method acculturating individuals to traditional values (whatever these may be) in order to facilitate critical thinking and rational freedom – qualities argued to be essential precursors to human flourishing (e.g. Jensen, 2000; Nussbaum, 1997).

The existence of such precursors to positive education calls for some justification of why I review here positive education as opposed to the wider spectrum of flourishing-oriented pedagogies and/or learning theories. I justify the focus on positive education in two ways. Firstly, the present thesis is, for the most part, based in the discipline of positive psychology<sup>12</sup> and seeks to critique, and suggest ways to improve, existing theoretical perspectives used in positive education. As such, my purpose is to help contribute to change in positive education as a distinct area of positive psychology, and I propose to begin this first by reviewing it as it currently is. Secondly, because the spectrum of other pedagogical traditions and education programmes is so vast (particularly when the general aim "human flourishing" is broadly defined), to review it comprehensively would be both impractical and beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, I "make do" here only by acknowledging the existence and significance of the wider area of flourishing-oriented pedagogies, and instead focus on positive education as one relevant contemporary strand of theory and application that has at least partially proceeded from these.

### **2.2.2. What is positive education?**

The term positive education is defined by Green et al. (2011) as "applied positive psychology in education" (p. 16; see also Waters, 2011), while Seligman et al. (2009) describe it as "teach[ing] both the skills of well-being and the skills of achievement" (p. 294). Because these definitions may be insufficiently descriptive, I will propose here an additional and complementary definition for the purposes of this thesis. Specifically, I

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<sup>12</sup> However, as noted previously (Chapter One, footnote 8, p. 7), I will also draw on relevant literature from outside positive psychology.

suggest that positive education may be considered as the practical application of empirically validated positive psychological constructs, strategies, and principles in educational settings with the aim of facilitating, maintaining, and enhancing students' wellbeing, either as a whole, or as specific facets of wellbeing (e.g. positive emotions, positive behaviours, or positive cognitions). Such applications may be in the form of holistic wellbeing programmes, which incorporate mainstream school subjects, or in the form of narrower initiatives (e.g. stand-alone wellbeing courses). Perhaps more importantly, positive education differs from other wellbeing-oriented educational interventions, such as anti-bullying or anti-drugs programmes, in that it aims to achieve wellbeing by actively cultivating positive factors, rather than by eliminating negative ones (see Waters, 2011).

### **2.2.3. The emergence of positive education**

My aim in this section is not to debate the reasons why we should pursue flourishing in education – these are largely the same as discussed in Chapter One and have been considered in greater depth elsewhere (see, for example, de Ruyter, 2004, 2007, and Noddings, 2003). Instead, I will briefly introduce some of the debates on the purpose(s) of education, or why we educate. This will lead me to the rationale and aims of positive education.

#### **2.2.3.1. The changing purpose of education**

The philosophy of education, and, specifically, of the purpose(s) of education, is a topic on which the volume of literature is vast and largely beyond the scope of this thesis to review (see, for example, Noddings, 1995, and Reed & Johnson, 1996). As Lloyd Yero (2001) notes, the most salient point that should be made about this literature is that there is virtually no degree of consensus among theorists on the meaning or purpose(s) of education, despite that the question may seem relatively straightforward or obvious on the surface. Each person's understanding of the purpose of education will be shaped by his or her own experiences, beliefs, and values, and by the wider cultural context and historical milieu in which he or she is situated (Lloyd Yero, 2001). Some of the noteworthy theorists in the area of purpose(s) of education include Socrates, the Sophists, John Dewey, Ayn Rand, Nel Noddings, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Noam Chomsky, and Paulo Freire.<sup>13</sup> The Sophists, for example, practiced a form of education which emphasised the teaching of *arete* (virtue) to young noblemen primarily for the purpose of making them employable by the state during the classical Greek and Roman

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<sup>13</sup> These examples appear in no particular order and are intended only to demonstrate the breadth of perspectives on the "purpose debate." Many other salient theorists exist.

periods (Duke, 2012). This form of education might be regarded as purposing to teach an essential curriculum for practical ends such as social status or employment.

A different example comes from critical pedagogy. In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/2000) argues that the primary purpose of education must be to enable individuals to liberate or emancipate themselves from oppressive social norms and institutions. This argument was developed from Freire's impromptu interactions with peasant farmers in Chile (see Monchinski, 2008). In this episode, the farmers initially preferred to *listen passively* to Freire, stating that he was more knowledgeable than them due to his education. However, when Freire showed that he knew as little about farming practice as the farmers knew about academic topics, the interaction turned to bi-directional conversation. Thus, Freire (1970/2000) argues that many individuals are socialised by institutions to believe that certain forms of knowledge are superior to others, with the possessors of superior knowledge being able to transcend, or oppress, others. Once oppressed individuals are enabled to view their own knowledge as equal to their oppressors', they are then able to achieve liberation from the institutions that oppress them.

In another example of purpose, Nel Noddings (2003) has argued that contemporary education places insufficient emphasis on positive emotions and wellbeing in students. She points out that learning in the traditional classroom focuses too heavily on factors such as obedience, conformity, and sanctions against incorrect behaviour, whereas education has the potential to be used as a vehicle to cultivate happiness. Noddings' viewpoint is somewhat congruent with positive psychological perspectives on the purpose of education.

In the UK, particularly from the 1980s onwards, the increased salience of economic change and the entry of free market ideologies into the education sector led to a gradual re-orientation of purpose towards equipping students with achievement-related skills, professional development, and employability (Coffey, 2001; Henkel, 2000; Olssen et al., 2004). Whilst acknowledging the benefit of preparing students more effectively for entering the workforce after graduation, Seligman (2011) argues that changes such as these are problematic in terms of their narrow view of what education is for. Specifically, there is a 'lack of fit' between modern Western education and our ideal of human flourishing as a desirable end:

...what do you want most for your children? If you are like the thousands of parents I've polled, you responded, "happiness,"... "fulfilment,"... "good stuff"... and the like. In short, *well-being* is your topmost priority for your children. [...] what do schools teach? If you are like other parents, you

responded, “achievement,” “thinking skills,”... “discipline,” and the like. In short, what schools teach is how to succeed in the workplace. Notice that there is almost no overlap between the two lists. (Seligman, 2011, p. 78, emphasis in original).

In a study of over 1000 young people in Nottingham, UK, Shah and Marks (2004; Marks & Shah, 2005) report significant drops in school satisfaction and curiosity in students during and after the transition from primary to secondary school. They argue the results suggest that stakeholders in education (students, teachers, parents) seem to be unclear on the purpose(s) of education, contending that the current system requires a de-emphasis on assessment which is oriented merely towards achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and large-scale re-orientation towards education for human flourishing – or “positive education.”

### **2.2.3.2. Why positive education?**

Positive education could be argued to be a timely development in education for at least two reasons. Firstly, it acts as a buffer against increasing rates of mental disorder. Secondly, the wellbeing of students, which positive education aims to accomplish, is known to enhance learning and academic performance.

Rates of depression- and anxiety-related disorders among various adolescent samples have been reported to have increased steadily in recent decades (Keyes, 2009b). For example, in the 1980s, 10% of children in the US were estimated to have had a major depressive episode by the age of 14 (Garrison, Schluchter, Shoenbach & Kaplan, 1989) while in the early 1990s, 10-20% of young people in the US were estimated to have had an anxiety or mood disorder or substance abuse problem by the age of 18 (Lewinsohn et al., 1993). In the UK, more recently, 2% of children aged 11-15 and 11% of youth aged 16-24 have been estimated to have a major depressive disorder (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford & Goodman, 2005). Thus, it is clear there is a strong need for positive education programmes in educational settings to combat the increasing risk of mental disorder and other problems among school-aged children and youth. Focusing on wellbeing enhancement may be one useful strategy for this.

It is useful to note that positive education does not seek to create educational institutions in which skills for success and professional development, mentioned in the quotation from Seligman (2011) above, are eradicated from the curriculum; instead, it is envisioned as a means by which skills and knowledge for wellbeing can be taught to and facilitated in students alongside those for success and professional development (Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009). Educating for both wellbeing and success are aims essentially complementary to one another as there are increasing arguments and

evidence that wellbeing is positively associated with students' academic performance (e.g. Bernard & Walton, 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011) and that aspects of wellbeing, such as positive emotions, can reliably lead to more effective learning (e.g. Fredrickson, 2004, 2009; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, for example, is an integrative theory that illustrates the role of emotions such as joy, interest and contentment in broadening what Fredrickson calls an individual's "thought-action repertoire," leading to curiosity, engagement and exploration of the environment (see Fredrickson, 2001, 2003, 2004). The theory holds that experience of joy leads to play, interest prompts exploration and contentment brings about savouring the moment, all of which enhance (broaden) individuals' mindsets and populate (build) the pool of their intellectual, social and psychological resources (coping skills, creativity, cognitive strategies, etc.). Broaden-and-build theory has been supported by a range of empirical studies spanning 20 years (reviewed in Isen, 2000). For instance, Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) reported that participants who had just watched a film in which positive emotions were evoked were able to list a larger repertoire of behavioural responses when asked what they would like to do in a similar emotional situation compared with participants who had watched either a negatively evocative film or a neutral film. This suggests the experience of positive emotion enables creative thinking/learning.

The potential for wellbeing enhancement in educational settings, both as a worthwhile end in itself and as an aid to effective learning, has led to some educational theorists and educational psychologists arguing for greater integration of positive psychological theory into educational practice (e.g. Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal & Riley-Tillman, 2004). This has complemented longer-term existing arguments within educational psychology in favour of shifting practice from an emphasis on deficits (e.g. learning disabilities, behavioural problems) to an emphasis on strengths (see Reschly, 1976, 1988, 2000; Reschly & Ysseldyke, 1999).

Having discussed the historical context and reasons for the emergence of positive education, I will now proceed to review positive education initiatives, beginning with positive education in schools.

## **2.3. Positive education in schools**

### **2.3.1. The scope of positive education in schools**

Positive education initiatives have received the most research interest and implementation at the compulsory level of education – primary and secondary schools –

and it has been argued the number of schools introducing positive education programmes is on the rise (Green et al., 2011). There is a rich array of positive education programmes currently developed for schools. Many of these are comprehensive programmes that include full positive psychological curricula and classroom and homework activities, and aim to increase across-the-board wellbeing, while others are smaller in scope and target increasing specific qualities such as hope or gratitude. In this section, I will first review the major comprehensive and then the smaller-scope positive education programmes currently implemented in schools.

### **2.3.2. Positive education programmes in schools**

Since the mid-1980s, a wide and growing range of positive education programmes have been developed and implemented in schools across the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere (Waters, 2011).

The idea of pursuing wellbeing as a worthwhile end in education is not new or unique to positive psychology. Rather, the development of positive education programmes and interventions is a recent development within a longer-term shift from predominantly essentialist pedagogies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (with notable exceptions, such as Montessori) to an increased interest in student wellness in the latter half of the century (Noddings, 1995a, 2003). McGrath (2009) argues this shift has manifested in various forms in recent decades; for example as an interest in pupil self-esteem in the 1970s, social skills programmes in the 1990s, and resilience programmes in the 2000s. Currently, the most common school-based programmes tend to focus on issues such as anti-bullying, health and fitness, values, and wider student wellbeing (McGrath, 2009). Positive education programmes in schools constitute one distinct group of such programmes. I will first review the larger-scale ones.

As I noted in Chapter One, the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) could be considered the flagship programme of the positive education movement. First developed in the 1980s (Gillham et al., 1990), the PRP aims to prevent depressive symptoms by teaching optimism, realistic thinking, coping, assertiveness, problem solving, decision making, and relaxation (Seligman et al., 2009) in order to boost students' resilience against daily stress and challenges commonly experienced during adolescence. The PRP has been widely researched since its inception; including with several randomised controlled trials (RCTs)<sup>14</sup> involving over 2000 students aged 8-15 (Seligman et al.,

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<sup>14</sup> Kalksma-Van Lith (2007) offers a succinct definition of RCTs:

An RCT is a study with two groups, one treatment group and one control group. Individuals who are similar at the beginning are randomly allocated to one of these groups.

*Continues overleaf »*

2009) in schools across the US, UK, Australia, Portugal, and China, by both University of Pennsylvania and independent researchers. In a comprehensive review of 17 PRP evaluations studies, Seligman et al. (2009) report that the PRP significantly reduces depressive symptoms immediately following the programme and that these reductions have been sustained at 12, 18, and 24 months post-completion (Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008; Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox & Seligman, 1995). The PRP has also been successfully assessed to reduce the diagnosis chance of clinical depression and anxiety disorders in at-risk students and to act as a buffer against hopelessness (Gillham, Hamilton, Freres, Patton & Gallop, 2006). Seligman et al. (2009) also report that the PRP appears to work equally well with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, suggesting that the programme has high potential utility across a variety of cultural settings. Effect sizes are consistently larger when the programme is implemented by University of Pennsylvania staff or instructors trained by them, indicating instructor training is important to the programme's success (Brunwasser & Gillham 2008).

There are at least two other large-scale positive education programmes aimed at cultivating resilience. The first, Bounce Back!, was devised in Australia by McGrath and Noble (2003, 2011), who argue that positive educational programmes must entail sustainable influence over the course of formal education, rather than just brief interventions, in order to continue re-affirming resilience-enhancing skills in students in developmentally appropriate ways. Therefore, Bounce Back! is designed as a multi-level, multi-faceted learning programme which can be integrated into regular school subjects (e.g. maths, history, social studies, art) from the beginning of primary school up until middle school. The programme consists of evidence-based principles and strategies taken from cognitive and positive psychology, such as fostering positive relationships, finding courage, using humour as a coping skill, and balancing positive and negative emotions (McGrath & Noble, 2011).

The other resilience-based programme is You Can Do It! (YCDI!), another Australian initiative created by Bernard (2004). YCDI! focuses on helping young adolescents develop resilience through classroom-based lessons on confidence,

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The treatment group receives the treatment under investigation, and the control group receives either no treatment or some standard default treatment. The outcomes of the groups are compared after sufficient follow-up time. (p. 17).

In the context of positive education, conducting an RCT to assess a wellbeing programme would mean administering the programme to one group of students while a demographically comparable group receive no programme or a neutral programme not related to wellbeing. Students in the two groups would then be compared in terms of changes in their wellbeing – differences in scores on wellbeing measures before and after the programme.

perseverance, organisational skills, and positive social relationships. Bernard and Walton (2011) carried out an evaluation of the effectiveness of YCDI! on a controlled (but not randomised) trial involving 557 Grade 5 students from 12 state schools in Australia (six schools,  $N=389$  treatment group and six schools,  $N=208$  controls). Following programme implementation, the two groups were compared on their scores on the Attitudes to School Survey (ASS; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2013).<sup>15</sup> Throughout a 12-month follow-up period, students in the YCDI! group demonstrated increased scores on a variety of ASS indicators (e.g. morale, learning, confidence, motivation, behaviour, connectedness with peers), while the control group exhibited improvement in only two indicators (Bernard & Walton, 2011). Recently, Ashdown and Bernard (2012) applied YCDI! to younger students aged 4-6 who were studying in preparatory and Grade 1 classes at a Catholic school in Melbourne. The programme was delivered over a period of 10 weeks via direct instruction lessons given by the class teacher and was supplemented with additional positive psychological teaching practices. Results indicated that the YCDI! programme led to statistically significant decreases in Grade 1 students' disruptive behaviour (e.g. hyperactivity problems), increases in lower-achieving Grade 1 students' reading skills, and increases in both Grade 1 and preparatory students' emotional competence and wellbeing.

While the PRP, Bounce Back!, and YCDI! are comprehensive resilience-based programmes, other curricula have been developed that target more diverse aspects of wellbeing, such as character strengths, mindfulness, wisdom, emotional intelligence, and achieving goals. The first of these is the Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum. The major goal of the Strath Haven programme is to help students identify and utilise their "character strengths." Character strengths may be conceptualised as virtuous traits or characteristics that are valued across different cultures and are understood to affirm and exalt human flourishing. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) Values in Action Inventory of Strengths Classification presents a systematically developed manual of personal strengths valued universally across cultural settings (e.g. humanity, temperance, transcendence, justice, wisdom; see Dahlsgaard, Peterson & Seligman, 2005). Apart from the development of character strengths, Seligman et al.

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<sup>15</sup> The ASS is a large-scale survey administered to youth from Grade 5 to Year 12 in Victoria, Australia. Its objectives are defined as "to collect data about the opinions of students from Year 5 to Year 12 and for individual schools across Victoria to use this information to drive improvement" (DEECD, 2013, para. 1).

(2009) state that the secondary aims of Strath Haven are to “promote resilience, positive emotion, and students’ sense of meaning or purpose” (p. 301).

Strengths-based positive education programmes have also received attention by UK researchers. Celebrating Strengths, for example, helps children in primary school identify, develop, and deploy their strengths using an innovative story-telling approach (Fox Eades, 2004, 2006, 2008). In this programme, students and teachers read age-appropriate traditional fables/fairytales (e.g. *The Little Red Hen*) in class to illustrate and discuss strengths such as kindness and gratitude. Students are then invited to tell their own stories about the strength, and later to participate in a homework activity to apply the strength themselves (Fox Eades, 2008). A programme similar to Celebrating Strengths – Strengths Gym – has also been developed for application to adolescents in middle school (Proctor, Tsukayama, Wood, Maltby, Fox Eades & Linley, 2011). Strengths Gym follows Celebrating Strength’s utilisation of storytelling to encourage students to think about, discuss, and apply strengths such as “love of beauty.” Proctor et al. (2011) applied the Strengths Gym programme to 218 Year 8 and 9 students at two schools in Cheshire and the Channel Islands, UK, over the school term. Following programme completion, the students were compared to 101 students in a control group who had not received strengths-based training. The intervention group was found to exhibit statistically significant increases in life satisfaction compared to the control group, while considerable (though not statistically significant) increases were also observed in the intervention group’s positive affect. However, the groups did not differ on measures of negative affect or self-esteem (Proctor et al., 2011).

Over the last decade, Robert Sternberg has developed a pedagogical programme, Teaching for Wisdom, that aims to encourage students to think about and develop wisdom (e.g. Sternberg, 2001; Sternberg, Reznitskaya & Jarvin, 2007). He argues that although folklore and common sense have traditionally dictated that qualities such as intelligence and wisdom are fixed traits (“either you have it, or you don’t”), research suggests that they are largely context-specific and malleable (e.g. Sternberg, 1987, 1998). Thus, Teaching for Wisdom integrates thinking about and practicing wisdom into regular school subjects such as language arts and social and natural sciences using 16 specific teaching methods and 7 curricular areas/modules. Importantly, the programme emphasises process over prescription – that is, it teaches students to think about their own understandings of wisdom rather than attempting to impart a pre-determined definition on them. Initial explorations of programme effectiveness have been positive (e.g. Reznitskaya & Sternberg, 2004), although wider applications and

evaluations are needed to integrate wisdom-based curricula into comprehensive positive education programmes.

Apart from traditional knowledge- or logic-oriented intelligence/wisdom, numerous curricula on social and emotional intelligence have also been successfully implemented in some countries. For example, McCown, Jensen, Freedman and Rideout (2010) describe Self Science, a school-based learning programme that centres on developing socioemotional skills. Self Science was originally developed in the 1970s, and has been increasingly implemented in schools around the world. Based on the principle that emotional intelligence arises from the study of the self and interactions with others, Self Science offers students multiple options on how to act in social situations, rather than prescribe what not to do. Through being encouraged to make and reflect on their own choices, students have demonstrated increased cooperation and positive classroom relationships and reduced violent and disruptive behaviour (McCown et al., 2010). A programme closely resembling Self Science, the South Africa Emotional Intelligence Curriculum, has also been implemented successfully with largely the same results (De Klerk & Le Roux, 2003).

A final popular positive educational programme is Making Hope Happen for Kids (Edwards & Lopez, 2000; Lopez, Snyder, Magyar-Moe, Edwards, Pedrotti & Janowski, 2004). The programme was adapted from Making Hope Happen (McDermott & Snyder, 1999), an evidence-based workbook of strategies for helping adults increase their hope, hopeful thinking, and hope-driven goal setting and attainment (in turn, the adult programme is based on principles and evidence-based strategies from Hope Theory – see Snyder, 1994). In Making Hope Happen for Kids, school-aged children construct and discuss a narrative about overcoming obstacles through keeping up hope, write stories about achieving their goals by acting with hope, and practice social interactions using hopeful language. Results of the programme have been initially favourable, and attempts are now being made to integrate hope-based learning into other aspects of schooling (e.g. school psychologists'/counsellors' practice; Pedrotti, Edwards & Lopez, 2008).

### **2.3.3. Other positive education interventions in schools**

Not all successful wellbeing programmes are large-scale/comprehensive or necessarily expensive to implement. There are many smaller-scale positive psychology interventions (PPIs)<sup>16</sup> which, although not implemented over extended time periods,

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<sup>16</sup> For a definition of PPIs, please refer to Chapter One (footnote 11, p. 14).

have been developed specifically for application to students in educational settings. The most comprehensive review of these to date is by Waters (2011). She summarises several notable school-based PPIs that have been empirically demonstrated to improve a range of aspects of students' wellbeing (e.g. hope, strengths, serenity).

Green, Anthony, and Rynsaardt (2007) evaluated a 2-term, 10-lesson coaching intervention in an RCT involving senior students from a private girls' high school in Australia. Compared with controls, girls who had the approximately fortnightly meetings with a teacher-coach had significantly higher levels of hope and hardiness and significantly lower levels of depression and anxiety, although stress levels in the two groups remained comparable. A 5-week intervention in which young adolescents engaged in weekly 60-minute lessons on hope has also been effective in enhancing wellbeing. Marques, Lopez and Pais-Ribeiro (2011) report that compared to controls matched for age, gender, school year, ethnicity and baseline wellbeing levels, students participating in these sessions exhibit significantly higher levels of hope, life satisfaction and self-worth post-completion. These effects were found to be sustained in the intervention group students 6 and 18 months later (see also Waters, 2011).

Similar PPIs such as "counting blessings" – which involves students writing in a reflective gratitude journal – and the "gratitude visit" – in which students write a letter of thanks to someone significant to them and deliver it – have also effected gains in gratitude, positive affect, optimism, and life satisfaction in students of diverse ages (8-19 years), both immediately following the interventions and sustainably over several weeks to months afterwards (e.g. Froh, Kashdan, Ozimowski & Miller, 2009; Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008).

Some researchers have tested transcendental/meditational interventions for enhancing students' wellbeing. For example, Waters (2011) discusses several interventions involving mindfulness meditation/training in which students engage in mindfulness meditation or mindfulness-based class activities (e.g. as part of health studies curricula). Evidence of increased wellbeing in comparison to controls is somewhat mixed. Broderick and Metz (2009) report their 6-part mindfulness curriculum produced increased relaxation, emotional regulation, and self-acceptance in a group of seniors from a Catholic girls' school in Pennsylvania, compared to controls. Nidich, Mjasiri, Nidich, Rainforth, Grant, Valosek et al. (2011) report similar results – increased calmness, happiness, and ability to focus on academic work – in their sample of Californian middle school students who did a 3-month daily meditation exercise. However, Huppert and Johnson (2010) found no significant effect of a month-long

weekly mindfulness training course, delivered as part of religious education lessons, on adolescents at two private boys' schools in England. Thus, more research is needed in the area of mindfulness/meditation-based PPIs to clarify the nature of their effects on student wellbeing.

Finally, numerous PPIs have incorporated brief "strength-spotting" exercises to boost awareness and employment of strengths in school-aged children and youth. These have generally been very successful. In a within-participants study, Madden, Green and Grant (2010) tested a strengths-based coaching intervention on Grade 5 students at a private boys' Catholic school and found the students had increased levels of hope and engagement compared to their baseline levels. In a similar vein, Austin (2005) had students engage in a 6-week Gallup Strengths Framework intervention (identifying, sharing, and writing about their signature strengths) and reports higher efficacy, self-empowerment, and motivation post-completion compared to controls.

#### **2.3.4. Whole-school positive education**

The positive education programmes and interventions discussed above have, as seen, been implemented on select groups of students drawn via opportunity or convenience sampling<sup>17</sup>, usually involving only 2-3 groups within a school. Although these serve well to evaluate self-contained intervention programmes, it has often been argued that the ideal way to implement positive education is via a 'whole school' approach – that is, through comprehensive integration of positive education curricula, extra-curricula, pedagogy, administration, management, and wider school culture into all aspects of the school environment (Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). Through such integration, a variety of PPIs and programmes can be synthesised to create a "positive school." Now, there are several whole-school initiatives, ranging from dedicated whole-school positive education programmes to comprehensive integration of the breadth of positive psychology research and application to every aspect of school.

The classic whole-school example of positive education is Geelong Grammar School, a private K-12 (combined primary and secondary) boarding school with about 1500 students spread across four campuses in Victoria, Australia (see Seligman, 2008, and Seligman et al., 2009, for detailed reviews). In 2008, management at the school extended an invitation to positive psychology scholars at the University of Pennsylvania

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<sup>17</sup> Opportunity or convenience sampling may be defined as selecting a group of research participants on the basis of their convenient accessibility, rather than via random selection (see Fink, 1995). For example, if I wish to conduct a study on obesity, instead of attempting to draw a random group of obese individuals from the population, I may find it more convenient to approach a local weight loss club, where I am likely to find a "naturally occurring" group of obese individuals already existent.

to develop a whole-school approach to enhancing students' wellbeing. Thus, a team of researchers travelled to the school – some visiting and some remaining in residence for longer periods – to train teachers and other staff on positive curricula and teaching practices, PPIs, and other topics such as strengths and positive emotions. A full positive education programme has been implemented across all levels and areas of the school. For example, secondary-level students attend lectures on strengths, where they are introduced to the theory and research behind character strengths and invited to write about times when they have displayed their own strengths. Other subjects include positive emotions, kindness, and using Albert Ellis' (1962) "ABC" model<sup>18</sup> to develop realistic and resilient coping strategies. Students actively participate in practical positive psychology exercises on each of these.

Apart from direct instruction in positive psychology topics, Geelong students also use positive psychology principles and ideas in traditional academic subjects. In English Literature, class discussions centre on topics such as identifying the strengths of protagonists in the works under study (e.g. *MacBeth*), while geography lessons focus on wellbeing measurement across nations and foreign language classes involve students researching how wellbeing is understood and practiced in French, Japanese, or Chinese culture. Through teaching positive psychology to students directly and by embedding its core principles into both other school subjects and wider school culture, Seligman et al. (2009) report that students have started to "live" positive education outside of school, too, for example in their home environments among parents, siblings, and other family members and friends.

Although initial anecdotal evidence is promising, the Geelong project has not yet been fully empirically evaluated, and thus more research is needed in this area to establish its effectiveness as a pathway to creating a "flourishing institution" (Williams, 2011). Evaluation of the effectiveness of the Geelong project is likely to involve anecdotal and longitudinal assessments because, as Seligman (2008) notes, the researchers heading the projects were unable to secure a similar school to act as a control group.

Meanwhile, also in Australia, three further schools are currently having comprehensive positive education curricula and pedagogies integrated throughout their classes (Green et al., 2011). These are encompassed within two large-scale positive

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<sup>18</sup> According to Ellis' model, it is less the Adversities themselves and more our prior Beliefs that bring about Consequent emotions. Thus, by consciously regulating our beliefs about adversities we experience, we can influence the emotions we feel.

education projects. The first, the Knox Grammar School Project, is a 3-year programme being implemented at Knox, a private boys' school in Sydney. The aims of the Knox project have been described as "...the development of explicit and implicit integrated components (including curriculum) aimed at teaching staff, students and key stakeholders specific strengths-based, solution focused knowledge and skills to apply in their school work and life" (Positive Psychology Institute, 2011, p. 1). The second, the Gray's Point Public School Wellbeing Project, involves the development of a comprehensive integrated "coaching + positive psychology" programme for two Sydney-based public high schools, North Sydney Girls' High and North Sydney Boys' High. Although both projects remain in their early stages, they represent the first whole-school positive education projects to be set up for empirical evaluation. Preliminary results from the Gray's Point project have already shown the interventions are effecting increased student wellbeing in comparison to a control group (O'Keeffe, 2012), and thus the programme is being rolled out to a wider group of schools in the Sydney area (Green et al., 2011).

In the UK in 2006, the private school Wellington College set up a school-wide programme known as Skills of Wellbeing, which aims to introduce students to socioemotional, coping, and other wellbeing-related skills that empower them to live well, thus adding a separate dimension to college education that goes beyond a singular emphasis on mere grade/exam achievement (Baylis & Morris, 2006). Furthermore, in North America, numerous schools have also begun to introduce courses, programmes, and resources in a school-wide capacity to enable student wellbeing. Key School in Indianapolis has developed a "Flow Activities Center," an inclusive facility open to all students for the purposes of engaging in self-selected and self-directed activities of interest during free time, thus encouraging the experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Also in Indiana, the Culver Academies, a group of boarding high schools, have started a programme of teacher training in character strengths and positive emotion to enable staff to infuse their curriculum and pedagogy with positive psychology principles and evidence-based strategies for enhancing student wellbeing at school (see Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011, p. 212).

In this section I have reviewed the spectrum of positive education initiatives currently being implemented in schools. Preliminary anecdotal and empirical evidence has generally shown such initiatives are useful in effecting positive change in students' behaviour and socioemotional and cognitive skills. However, despite this, some

problems remain within positive education theory and practice which relate to the contextlessness I discussed in Chapter One. In the next section, I will attempt to demonstrate how these problems emerge.

## **2.4. Contextlessness in school-based positive education**

### **2.4.1. Returning to contextlessness**

As noted in Chapter One, I propose to consider three areas (or forms) of contextlessness in school-based positive education programmes that arise from abstractionist assumptions underlying positive psychology and its applied fields. Here, I will attempt to show how the problem of contextlessness emerges in some school-based positive education initiatives.

### **2.4.2. Contextless conceptualisation**

Numerous proponents of positive education have noted that positive education programmes aim to help students flourish (e.g. Green et al., 2011; Williams, 2011). However, existing positive education initiatives have not, to date, offered a conceptualisation of what it means to “flourish in context” – for example, to flourish as a student, at school or in the classroom – or what sorts of things (behaviours, emotions, cognitions – or social practices) this may entail, and this makes it difficult to visualise the utility of the initiatives. For example, the Strath Haven project’s (Seligman et al., 2009) primary content concerns the cultivation and utilisation of character strengths in students. Presumably, such a focus on character strengths must make some contribution to students’ flourishing. However, because the nature of student flourishing in educational contexts is unclear, it cannot reasonably be ascertained what this contribution is. Positive education programmes aim to achieve student flourishing without a clear idea of what this is. This is perhaps akin to trying to achieve a goal independently of the context of an overarching ideal.

It could be argued that a context-specific conceptualisation of flourishing would be impossible due to the personal nature and experiential qualities of flourishing. Following a relational perspective, I do not argue that flourishing can be conceptualised entirely objectively or abstractly or that a “tick box” style set of criteria should be rigidly applied to individuals. However, it also does not seem to make sense that flourishing in an educational context is a phenomenon so personal that no common understanding of it can be offered. Rather, I argue that flourishing in education is likely to have a particular nature that makes it distinct from “abstract” (or contextless) flourishing (for example, the contextless flourishing emerging within Seligman’s [2011] PERMA theory), and, although this context-specific flourishing can vary across

individual students, it is unique and relevant to the context of education as perhaps has greater utility as a researchable construct because, as I argued in Chapter One, flourishing cannot practically be separated from the context in which it occurs. Thus, it seems that positive education may benefit from exploration of what flourishing may mean in the context of education, though, as I will argue later in Chapter Three, such exploration must be conducted inductively – beginning from the context rather than abstract theory – in order to be practically useful to positive education.

### **2.4.3. Contextless measurement**

As noted in Chapter One, “mainstream” positive psychology strongly adheres to empiricism as the most reliable method of assessing the effectiveness of interventions (here, positive education initiatives) which aim to enhance the wellbeing of individuals (e.g. Seligman, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). Because of this strong adherence to empiricism, the effectiveness of positive education initiatives (say, in enhancing resilience in the PRP or character strengths in the Strath Haven project) is evaluated via RCTs or other experimental or quasi-experimental methods which require empirical measurement of variables. For instance, if one wishes to evaluate the effectiveness of a programme that aims to improve optimism in schoolchildren, this would usually, within the constraints of empiricism, be done using a psychometric measurement tool which assesses an operationalised conception of optimism.

Actual examples of psychometric measures from the initiatives I reviewed above might include the ACER Well-Being Survey (Bernard, Magnum & Urbach, 2009) used in the YCDI! trial reported by Ashdown and Bernard (2012) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) used in Proctor et al.’s (2011) evaluation of the Strengths Gym programme. The items in these scales offer statements that are conceptually generalised and do not make reference to contextual features of applied settings, similar to a newspaper horoscope. Therefore, these measures assess constructs at a global or generalised (contextless) level, or, in other words, constructs that are abstracted from the contexts in which they occur. Although such measures are useful for making evaluations of the prevalence of or changes in general wellbeing, they cannot assess wellbeing in specific contexts, because they are not constructed using conceptualisations of wellbeing-in-context. Thus, contextless measurement is a product of contextless conceptualisation. Contextless measurement of wellbeing could be argued to constitute a challenge in the case of positive education as although the field

aims to help students flourish in the context of education, it is currently largely unable to assess student flourishing in a way contextually relevant to educational settings.

It is worth noting that some measures of context-specific wellbeing do exist and have been used in positive education programme evaluation. One example of this is Scott Huebner's (1991a, 1991b) Students' Life Satisfaction Scale, used in the Strengths Gym study by Proctor et al. (2011). This scale was developed specifically for measuring life satisfaction in contexts salient to school-aged children (e.g. school, home/family, etc.). Therefore, this scale could be argued to provide a more valid empirical assessment of wellbeing in educational contexts than scales not designed with a particular context in mind.

If positive education aims to enhance student flourishing, and if, as I maintain, a relational, context-specific conceptualisation of student flourishing can be constructed, then it follows that this context-specific conceptualisation may be used to construct psychometric measurement tools that assess flourishing in the context of education in a more contextually valid manner than ones that assess global or contextless flourishing. I would not argue that such a tool might be superior to other measurement tools, but would merely serve to supplement them in a context-specific manner. I will return to the issue of context-specific measurement of flourishing in Chapter Four.

#### **2.4.4. Relationships with other contexts**

Positive education programmes appear to be somewhat "blind" to the many contexts in which education itself occurs. One such context may be economic. For instance, many of the positive educational interventions and initiatives I reviewed above have been applied to private rather than state schools (though there are some exceptions, such as the Gray's Point project). In some cases, discrepancies in available funds may create differences in the extent of the quality and range of the teaching and facilities available within a school, and this may in turn impact the implementation of any given intervention programme, or indeed the possibility of being able to fund such a programme. Another example may be the increasingly salient issue of student consumerist attitudes (which I will discuss in Chapter Five). Although student consumerist attitudes may apply more to the context of higher education (e.g. Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005), surveys of student attitudes and expectations are also beginning to be implemented in primary and secondary schools (e.g. the Attitudes to Schools Survey [ASS] mentioned earlier has been in use in Victorian state schools since 2003; DEECD, 2013) and therefore consumerism among students in compulsory-level education may be increasing in prevalence. The school-based positive education initiatives I have

reviewed above have not currently included empirical or other evaluations of the possible relationships between students' propensity for consumerist expectations of educational services and their potential to flourish, yet this would seem to be a pertinent consideration given that positive education is seeking to enhance flourishing in the same students among whom consumerist expectations are becoming more prevalent.

Another example may be taken from my review of the PRP. As mentioned, this programme has been tested on children from different racial groups, ethnicities, and indeed in different cultural settings (e.g. Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009). Evaluations suggest that the PRP is effective in enhancing resilience in children across such different contexts, and is therefore widely or even universally applicable. However, because of the abstractionist assumptions underlying the PRP, these evaluations place focus on searching for universal applicability rather than contextual influences on programme success. Therefore, although it is known, for example, that the programme “works” across different cultures, it is not known how these unique cultural contexts may influence the success of the programme.

While both Seligman (2008) and Waters (2011) advocate a whole school approach to positive education – that is, the integration of positive education into all aspects of the educational process, not just curriculum or stand-alone wellbeing classes – the programmes themselves tend to take a one-way, top-down approach to flourishing, teaching wellbeing in all areas of education but failing to explore the way broader social, cultural, political, economic and other contexts, in which education necessarily takes place, may directly or indirectly influence the process of flourishing they seek to facilitate. Thus, positive education, or flourishing, cannot simply be “spread out” over schools and across students: it in turn will be influenced by schools, students, and the complex contexts in which they occur.

## **2.5. Positive education in universities**

### **2.5.1. The scope of positive education in universities**

Positive education initiatives in higher education are arguably less far-reaching than in schools, and, at least within the boundaries of positive psychology, it has a shorter history than many of the school-level programmes, such as the PRP. However, it is necessary to note that this smaller scope in higher education may be attributable to the relatively limited range of published literature in the area, rather than a lack of actual academic activity, which is relatively widespread (e.g. Parks, 2011). Several successful stand-alone courses exist which teach positive psychology as a subject in itself (such as MAPP) and, later, other non-degree-level courses have also been developed. Currently,

no practically implemented whole institution positive education programme exists at any university, although there have been a few theoretical commentaries on what such a “positive university” might resemble (see Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009). In 2011 the *Journal of Positive Psychology* dedicated a special issue to positive psychology in higher education (Parks, 2011) which included several notable articles on the development of positive psychology teaching in universities, and therefore it may be anticipated that positive education can be integrated more widely into higher education in the future. In this section, I will review first the existing practical applications/programmes of positive psychology and positive education in universities and subsequently the existing theory on “whole institution” positive education across universities.

### **2.5.2. Practical applications**

The foremost example of positive psychology applied to higher education is the Masters in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) programme, an MSc-level postgraduate course which introduces students to basic and advanced theory and research in positive psychology and in which students engage in furthering positive psychological knowledge through their own theoretical and/or research projects. The first MAPP programme was founded by James Pawelski at the University of Pennsylvania in 2005/6, where it is currently co-directed by Martin Seligman. Shortly after the founding of MAPP at Pennsylvania, a similar MAPP programme was created by Ilona Boniwell at the University of East London in 2006/7. Both the US and UK MAPP initiatives have grown in size and popularity since their inceptions, and consistently attract students from diverse demographic and occupational backgrounds, including from industries such as education, consulting, business, and the voluntary sector (e.g. Hefferon, 2012). Although the two programmes differ considerably in terms of their modes and methods of delivery, assessments, and teaching staff, students on both programmes tend to be highly engaged with the subject matter and frequently give positive evaluations of the courses as enabling openness to learning and self-transformation. The possibility that ‘MAPPsters’ could have consistently higher levels of wellbeing than non-positive psychology students is currently being investigated (Boniwell & Seligman, in preparation).

Since MAPP opened its doors on either side of the Atlantic, other positive psychology courses have emerged at universities in different parts of the world, including both undergraduate and postgraduate level courses. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Jeanne Nakamura run graduate-level programmes in positive developmental

psychology and positive organisational psychology at Claremont Graduate University in California. Also in the US, Tal Ben-Shahar taught an undergraduate-level programme on positive psychology which famously became the most popular course in the history of the university (Russo-Netzer & Ben-Shahar, 2011). There is a Graduate Certificate in Applied Positive Psychology run by Anthony Grant at the University of Sydney and a suite of graduate-level positive psychology courses at the School of Positive Psychology in Singapore. City University in central London offers a 10-week short course of introductory positive psychology, run by Tim LeBon. Ilona Boniwell has recently launched a new Executive Certificate in Positive Leadership at the École Centrale in Paris. Finally, two new comprehensive MSc-level programmes have been launched – one at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, run by Hans Henrik Knoop and the other at Buckinghamshire New University in the UK.

Together, the growth in positive psychology courses at universities around the world signals that the popularity of learning and applying the subject matter of the discipline is increasing, which will, in the future, contribute to more graduates applying its frameworks to diverse sectors, areas of industry, and teaching and research at doctoral level (Hefferon, 2012). Currently, however, stand-alone courses in positive psychology, which provide direct instruction of the discipline to select groups of students, remain the only form of positive education concretely practiced in universities.

### **2.5.3. Theoretical perspectives**

The volume of theoretical perspectives on ‘what could be’ in creating a ‘positive higher education’ is encouraging and suggests that much of the potential to create flourishing university institutions remains largely unrealised at present. These perspectives offer idea(l)s of how a scientifically informed wellbeing focus can be integrated into whole institutions rather than just stand-alone courses, thereby reaching a greater number of both students and staff. In this section, I will first consider theory on incorporating positive psychology and education into mainstream psychology courses, and then discuss theory on whole institution approaches to the positive university.

#### **2.5.3.1. Positive education in psychology teaching**

Magyar-Moe (2011) discusses the notion of integrating positive psychology teaching and practice into mainstream subjects in psychology. Specifically, she argues that subjects with traditionally negative or neutral theoretical orientations, such as abnormal psychology or personality psychology, could be expanded to include topics that focus on the positive aspects of these areas, thus creating a theoretical balance. Also, these mainstream subjects could be taught with greater awareness of the use of positive and

affirmative pedagogic techniques. In the example of abnormal psychology, Magyar-Moe suggests that instructors should focus on factors such as using “people-first” language (e.g. “people with disabilities” instead of “disabled people”) and explicitly highlighting individuals’ strengths as well as their disabilities (strengths have been argued to have more beneficial effects when explicitly pointed out in language; Snyder, Lopez, Edwards, Pedrotti, Prosser, Walton et al., 2003). Also, both faculty staff and students could be encouraged to highlight examples of strengths in abnormal psychology reports and essays, rather than focus only on deficits.

At the curricular level, abnormal psychology instructors could also downplay the traditional pathological focus of the discipline’s subject matter and embrace a more balanced perspective, including recognising individuals’ resources, abilities, and potentials. For example, researchers and practitioners making diagnoses using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual<sup>19</sup> (e.g. American Psychiatric Association, 2000) currently operate on the basis of the manual’s 5-axis structure, all of which have an inherent pathological focus. Recently, positive psychology researchers have suggested a revised 7-axis diagnostic system which builds on the traditional 5-axis system by incorporating appropriate positive-focused aspects of mental disorders into the extant axes, and also by proposing the addition of two new axes, which go beyond mere identification and diagnosis of disorders to consider the cultural identities and understandings of the individual that may influence the diagnosis and prognosis, and the unique character strengths the individual possesses that can be deployed to assist with treatment and recovery (e.g. Lopez, Snyder, & Rasmussen, 2003; Magyar-Moe, 2009).

Other examples of positive psychology being integrated into mainstream psychology subjects include multicultural and/or cross-cultural psychology, counselling and psychotherapy, and individual differences. In cross-cultural psychology, for example, Magyar-Moe (2011) argues that curricula include a bias towards studying negative social phenomena (e.g. racism, ageism, classism, sex discrimination, prejudice)

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<sup>19</sup> The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) is a mental disorder diagnosis and classification handbook used by psychiatric practitioners and clinical researchers used primarily in the US, and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the world. Mental disorders described in the manual are organised into five distinct axes: Axis I includes clinical disorders and other disorders of potential clinical concern; Axis II includes personality and mental disorders; Axis III includes general medical conditions; Axis IV includes psychosocial and environmental problems; and Axis V includes a global assessment of functioning. When psychiatric diagnoses are made using the axial system, the “main” mental disorder (the disorder for which the patient requires treatment) is diagnosed on either or both Axes I and/or II. General medical conditions and/or psychosocial/environmental issues which may influence this main disorder are noted in Axes III and/or IV. Finally, Axis V is used to make an evaluation of the patient’s psychological, social, and/or occupational functioning for the purpose of establishing the prognosis of the disorder and the nature of any necessary treatment.

and would benefit from including discussions on the (in principle) positive and affirmative factors that can give rise to cross-cultural disparities, for example cultural values, beliefs, religiosity and spirituality, conceptions of health, and community cohesion. Incorporating an increased awareness of the possibility of positive aspects of cross-cultural differences may lead to the development of theories of ‘culturally sensitive optimal human functioning’ – the idea that, congruent with the main argument of the present thesis, flourishing is culturally specific (Magyar-Moe, 2011, p. 453; Christopher, 1999; Constantine & Sue, 2006).

The suggestions put forth by Magyar-Moe (2011) constitute conceivably feasible strategies for integrating positive psychological education into the everyday teaching of mainstream psychology subjects and perhaps also of other disciplines. However, the notion of applying positive education to whole institutions may be somewhat more involved than this. I will turn to theoretical discussions on this notion in the next section.

#### **2.5.3.2. Whole institution approaches to positive education**

One of the few major theoretical commentaries on positive education at tertiary level is Oades et al. (2011), who discuss the prospect of a positive university. Schreiner et al. (2009) have also offered extensive suggestions for creating a positive university, though their suggestions are oriented mostly towards academic staff and instructors, while Oades et al. target the wider university community. Oades et al. (2011) argue that positive education needs to be extended to incorporate tertiary levels of educational systems, as these have been neglected in positive psychological literature relative to schools with the exception of stand-alone postgraduate courses such as MAPP. The authors acknowledge (as I did in Chapter One) the increasing prevalence of mental disorder and distress among university students and staff – something they attribute to the “high striving culture” (p. 433). According to them, the historical purpose of universities to cultivate intellectual excellence often results in their members engaging in behaviours apparently antithetical to wellbeing as understood in positive psychology (for example, long work hours, inadequate sleep, drug use). Given that both students and staff spend considerable proportions of their waking hours working at university, there seems to be reasonable opportunity for their wellbeing to be supported and enhanced within this setting, and there is some consensus on this view (e.g. Lopez, 2007; Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009).

According to Oades et al. (2011), to achieve a positive university requires an overhaul of every aspect of the institution – not just classroom teaching – and large-

scale re-orientation of these towards positive emotions, strengths, and wellbeing-enhancing skills. The authors make a series of recommendations for how to achieve this using the framework of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing (which includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment), which I discussed in Chapter One. The recommendations are spread for application across five distinct areas of university life: the classroom, social environments, local communities, faculty/administration, and residential communities. For reference in relation to my discussion, it is useful to consider a few examples of Oades et al.'s (2011) recommendations. For enhancing meaning in the classroom, for instance, they suggest the need to "develop curriculum that allows students to connect with strengths and values; Get students to contribute ideas for curriculum; Use student suggestions in curriculum development." (p. 434). Meaning enhancement in social environments may be achieved if we "develop social values from 'bottom-up.'" (p. 434). Examples of recommendations for other wellbeing elements and university domains include "implement 'strengths spotting' amongst residents" (p. 434) for enhancing positive emotions in residential settings, "give awards for outstanding contributions to community life" (p. 434) for encouraging accomplishment in the local community, and "recognize and reward work output at the team level (as opposed to the individual level)" (p. 434) for facilitating relationships amongst faculty and administration.

The recommendations made by Oades et al. resemble the strategies suggested by Schreiner et al. (2009). The latter authors, for example, suggest there is a need to "develop a sense of community in the classroom by connecting to students in ways that enhance their learning and emphasize the strengths they contribute" (p. 571) and to "spark curiosity by creating meaningful assignments that provide clear expectations, choices, and an optimal level of challenge" (p. 572).

Oades et al. (2011) point out that, in making these sorts of recommendations, it is important to recognise that universities are somewhat unique institutions. For instance, universities have many of the characteristics of schools (e.g. research, teaching, learning, scholarship), but, especially in recent decades, have also taken on many of the social and structural characteristics of commercial organisations (e.g. competition for state funding, commercial relationships with students, outsourcing of services). This makes it pertinent for wellbeing-oriented positive education recommendations such as those sampled above to be informed by other relevant disciplines such as organisational theory and behaviour (e.g. Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) and social work alongside positive psychology. This, Oades et al. (2011) argue, will

ensure positive educational practice in higher education is scientifically well-grounded and protect it from becoming a “fad” (as warned by Schreiner et al., 2009).

A key point made by Oades et al. (2011) regarding their recommendations for a positive university concerns the importance of context. They claim that, given the unique organisational nature of universities, the positive university must be enabling of positive learning and working *environments*, rather than just cognitive or emotional skills intrinsic to the individual, with these environments extending to organisational cultures and wider communities within which the university operates. In this sense, Oades et al. (2011) refer to their recommendations as “contextualized and tangible” (p. 435). I take issue with this claim, for three reasons.

Firstly, as I argued in Chapter One, in order for the application of theory to be genuine and meaningful, it must be informed by the (stakeholders in) the context within which it is applied (for application to be informed by theory is necessary, but insufficient). In Oades et al.’s commentary, although it is recognised that positive educational practice in universities must be informed by appropriate disciplines (e.g. positive psychology, organisational theory), no mention is made of the need for the overarching theory (the recommendations structured according to PERMA) to be informed by practice (staff, students, stakeholders, and the contextual nuances that mitigate implementation of the theory). In the recommendations, input from the context appears to be confined to incorporating feedback from students into class curriculum and social/residential values. Many of the remaining recommendations appear to be informed solely by positive psychological theory and show little consideration for how or if they are informed by practice. This apparent lack of bidirectional information constitutes a challenge in the context of the argument I raised earlier, particularly in terms of implementation of recommendations within contextual constraints that remain unconsidered.

A second issue in Oades et al.’s (2011) recommendations is the use of Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model of flourishing. This model provides a succinct and practical overview of some of the major aspects of overall wellbeing and Oades et al. suggest a variety of ways these may be put into action in university settings. However, apart from these suggestions being top-down (as mentioned above), they also appear to culminate in the promotion of a specific type of wellbeing – one characterised by high levels of each of the given elements of PERMA – which may not necessarily be a

completely relevant form of wellbeing to students in higher education settings.<sup>20</sup> For example, it is mentioned that university students often engage in behaviours detrimental to wellbeing (e.g. lack of sleep, use of drugs) and argued that these should be rectified via the application (or imposition) of positive education practices. It does not appear to be considered that certain apparently dysfunctional behaviours may sometimes be a necessary evil to enable the achievement of goals students may regard to be more significant, in the long term, than momentary pleasure or fun – such as disciplined, focused study to achieve effective learning.<sup>21</sup> In this case, the particular ways a student negotiates tradeoffs between, for example, long- and short-term goals, or work and leisure, may constitute a unique understanding or form of flourishing – something like a “flourishing-in-context” – pertaining specifically to the context (and contextual nuances, features, and constraints) of university. In other words, behaviours, emotions, and cognitions that appear to be antithetical to wellbeing in one context may be necessary for wellbeing in another, dependent upon the changing nature of wellbeing across contexts. The possibility of differences in interpretations of wellbeing that transcend minor differences, for example in the balance between different elements of the PERMA model, is therefore closed off by Oades et al. through the top-down application of this framework.

A final challenge in Oades et al.’s (2011) positive university is the contradiction emerging from acknowledgement of contextual factors at play in university settings, yet failure to explain how such factors may interact with the positive educational practices the authors propose for implementation. For example, the authors mention the issues of student consumerist attitudes/expectations arising from increased market competition within the higher education sector, but omit to consider the ways in which these may implicate or influence either student wellbeing or the positive educational practices they recommend. This seems significant in that both student consumerism and student wellbeing – including the practices related to each of these – occur within the same students and communities. In another example, regarding the development of positive residential environments, Oades et al. (2011) argue:

With financial challenges on universities, these ideals [the original residential college drawn from Oxford and Cambridge traditions] may have been significantly diluted to cost effective student housing with few if any of

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Smith’s (2008) critique of positive psychology as promoting a specific, uniform type of personality appears to be applicable here to an extent, despite it preceding Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model.

<sup>21</sup> Moreover, regarding such apparently dysfunctional behaviour as something “wrong” that needs fixing with positive education seems to contradict positive psychology’s turn away from a focus on pathology.

the value add of the peer support and social inclusion of the residential environment. In our view, a positive university will include great emphasis on residential environments because of their ability to impact the whole student... (pp. 437-438).

Here, although the “financial challenges” currently facing the higher education sector are acknowledged as a causal factor in the appearance of lower-cost student housing, their possible implications for the “great emphasis” on Oxbridge-style residential colleges advocated by the authors appear to be ignored. Again, here it is unclear how the theory can be meaningfully implemented since it does not appear to be informed by the context.

## **2.6. Towards a context-specific theory of flourishing in higher education**

So far in this chapter, I have considered how positive education came about and what it purposes to achieve. I have also reviewed school-based positive education programmes and some manifestations of contextlessness within them. Latterly, I discussed positive education at tertiary level in more detail, noting that whole institution applications of positive psychological theory do not yet exist, though theoretical commentaries that have considered this next step have also included some problematic issues regarding contextlessness. In coming to the main issue addressed in this thesis – contextlessness in flourishing in higher education – I will now offer some discussion of the importance of context-specificity in flourishing in higher education. My argument, that affording greater attention to the context-specific nature of flourishing in higher education settings is important, will inform the rationale for the overall thesis. To make this argument, I wish to make the following propositions:

- Positive education for flourishing in higher education is a worthwhile pursuit congruent with universities’ historical tradition of striving for excellence;
- The theoretical perspectives offering strategies to apply positive education to universities (e.g. Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009) are less likely to “work” than existing positive education initiatives already being implemented in schools due at least in part to a lack of consideration of the unique contextual characteristics of universities. Higher education communities are qualitatively different from schools; and
- If positive education is to be applied in higher education, it needs to adopt a change in perspective – one that accepts a greater role for context-specificity in understanding and measuring flourishing and has a greater awareness of the wider contexts in which higher education operates.

These propositions will lead me to propose the need for a context-specific theory of flourishing in higher education and for other applied domains of positive psychology in general.

### **2.6.1. Positive education for flourishing in higher education is a worthwhile pursuit**

As Oades et al. (2011) point out, universities have historically been institutions that strive for a high degree of excellence, particularly in intellectual pursuits such as teaching and research. This tradition of excellence seems intuitively congruent with the underlying ethos of positive education – to cultivate flourishing students (Green et al., 2011). Although the specific meanings of the concepts of excellence and flourishing are a separate issue (to which I will return below), numerous arguments have been put forth that affirm a synergistic relationship between them. Among these are, for instance, arguments from a philosophical perspective which have held that education and wellbeing serve one another (Noddings, 2003) and that flourishing is a worthwhile ideal to pursue in education (de Ruyter, 2004, 2012). In addition, empirical evidence within psychology, for instance research on broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001, 2004, 2009) which I discussed earlier (section 2.2.3.2, pp. 32-33), has demonstrated a reliable connection between positive emotions/experiences and effective/creative learning. Broaden-and-build theory has also been successfully applied to university settings to demonstrate empirical connections between positive emotions and flourishing (Ouweneel, Le Blanc & Schaufeli, 2011). If one assumes that all levels of education aim to cultivate some form of excellence in individuals, these arguments appear to be as applicable to tertiary level education as they are to primary or secondary level (Oades et al., 2011; Parks, 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009). Together, these philosophical and psychological arguments suggest that, converging with Seligman et al. (2009), there is room within education for both academic excellence and flourishing. What I mean by this is not that either of these goods (or ideals) can be “taught” in a uni-directional, teacher-to-student transmission of information, but rather that there is potential for practitioners within the domain of education to incorporate awareness of flourishing as an ideal into their everyday work and to actively encourage students to think and talk about their own understanding and practice of flourishing.

### **2.6.2. Extant theory on applying positive education to universities is unlikely to “work”**

If one accepts the assumption that human flourishing is a worthwhile good to pursue in higher education, one can turn to positive psychological theory on the positive

university. I reviewed the major theoretical papers on positive universities (Magyar-Moe, 2011; Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009) earlier in this chapter, arguing that, especially in the case of wider-capacity/whole-institution applications, underlying abstractionist assumptions and top-down imposition make the authors' recommendations problematic to implement due to the emergence of contextlessness. What I want to add to this point here is that the failure to consider the contextual characteristics of higher education that make it a unique domain appears to undermine the potential of the authors' recommendations to succeed if they were to be applied in practice. This is because I argue that higher education is a context that is in many ways different from schools and indeed from other institutions. I offer two reasons for this difference. These concern the organisational nature of universities and the nature of adult learners within them.

#### **2.6.2.1. The organisational nature of universities**

The first reason for my argument that universities are unique contexts is that they are organisationally different from schools. Specifically, they are different because, particularly in the contemporary era, they combine scholarship with commercial enterprise. Many commentators in the sector (e.g. Riesman, 1998; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) have noted that universities have gradually evolved from almost exclusively scholarly institutions to complex organisations that combine teaching and research with commercial services such as catering, accommodation, career/employability guidance, counselling, consulting, and local community partnerships. This complex organisational structure emerged over recent decades (particularly since the 1970s), especially in countries in which the funding of higher education began to undergo changes, such as decreases in state-awarded teaching budgets, the introduction of tuition fees, and increased competitiveness in seeking external research/teaching funds as a means of alternative income generation for the institution (Johnstone, 2006; Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010).<sup>22</sup>

The complex organisational structure taken on by universities – a mix of scholarship, enterprise, and a host of student and community services – makes them somewhat unique among educational institutions. Primary and secondary schools and kindergartens/nurseries, for example, may be considered less complex, less commercial, and more purely scholarly in comparison to universities. In a university, there are many more “sub-contexts,” or levels or areas of the organisation in which positive education could be applied. Oades et al. (2011) and Schreiner et al. (2009) touch on some of these

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<sup>22</sup> I will revisit the issue of organisational change in universities in Chapter Five.

sub-contexts, though as I noted, do not elaborate on the ramifications of these on student flourishing.

### **2.6.2.2. The nature of adult learners**

The second reason I offer for considering higher education a unique educational domain concerns the nature of its students as adult learners. After adult education became a distinct field of professional practice in the 1920s, numerous theories emerged concerning the process of learning in adults, particularly how this process differs from that of children, and to date no consensus exists on the topic (Merriam, 2001). Two of the major theories of adult learning put forward are Malcolm Knowles' (1980, 1984, 1985) andragogy and Tough's (1967, 1971) self-directed learning theories.

In his early works on andragogy (meaning "man-leading" [sic]; as opposed to pedagogy, "child-leading"), Knowles (e.g. 1968) argued that adult learners are inherently different from child learners in educational contexts in five ways. Merriam (2001) summarises these as:

...the adult learner... [is] someone who (1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning, (2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich source for learning, (3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (4) is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (p. 5).

Knowles (1980, 1984, 1985) later revised his theory, saying that the above characteristics did not always distinguish adult learners from children, but rather pedagogy and andragogy might be conceptualised as being at opposite ends of the same continuum. In this case, adult learners tend towards andragogy in learning situations in which they already possess a degree of relevant prior knowledge.

The second major adult learning theory, self-directed learning, holds that learners become more self-directed (self-motivating, self-guiding) as they mature (Tough, 1967, 1971). Whilst children in educational settings are traditionally directed by the teacher, Tough argues adults possess a greater propensity to direct themselves in learning, particularly in everyday settings. Importantly, later theorists highlight that the utility of self-directed learning in adults is to trigger movement towards political emancipation and social action (e.g. Andruske, 2000; Brookfield, 1993; Collins, 1996). The potential for self-directed learning to enable action in the political and wider social arenas of life significantly differentiates it from children's learning.

Needless to say, there is both wider debate surrounding andragogy and self-directed learning and also many other theories on the unique nature of adult learners. However, my point in summarising these two theories is to show that the way adults

think and behave as learners in educational settings is different from the way children think and behave. From this, it may be reasonably supposed that the specific methods and strategies one might use to apply positive education to adult learning situations – such as universities – would be different from those applied for children in schools. Moreover, they should be relevant to the needs and abilities of adult learners, which can differ from those of children. Positive psychology theorists such as Oades et al. (2011) and Schreiner et al., (2009) suggest methods of applying positive psychology principles and methods of wellbeing enhancement to higher education that are largely derived from school-based positive education literature (e.g. Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011), arguing that the success these principles and methods have had with schoolchildren suggests they would be equally successful in university students. My position here is that this argument is premature given that very little in-depth exploratory research exists on the nature of different facets of student wellbeing in the unique context of higher education. Flourishing, for example – the underlying goal of positive education – may be understood to have a nature or meaning for higher education students that differs from what extant positive psychological theories (e.g. those of Keyes, Diener, or Seligman) prescribe, or from what school-based positive education initiatives have aimed to accomplish in schools. Moreover, this unique, context-specific flourishing may be affected by myriad factors in the wider economic, social, political, cultural, and historical contexts within which higher education exists. This brings me to the central issue in this chapter: Context-specificity in flourishing.

### **2.6.3. Towards a context-specific theory of flourishing in higher education**

As I noted at the very end of Chapter One, in this thesis, I will present exploratory research on flourishing as it pertains specifically to higher education. The issue of context-specificity in flourishing is important to consider for a range of reasons I have discussed throughout Chapter One and the present chapter. To summarise, these reasons include the following.

Generally:

- Extant positive psychological theories of flourishing adopt an abstractionist ontological perspective which focuses on similarities of concepts across contexts and universally applicable understandings. One of the major drawbacks of this approach is it detracts contextual detail from flourishing as a human experience and a social practice in real-life applied situations.
- Another drawback of abstractionist theories is that it can be difficult to apply them in practice because they are not informed by the practitioners and other

relevant stakeholders who work in the domain of application, and therefore can be incongruent with the particular nuances and practical constraints of that context.

Specifically in higher education:

- Existing positive psychological theory on flourishing and positive education in universities is not derived from the context of higher education and could therefore be argued to be just as abstractionist as generic theories of flourishing (e.g. Keyes, Diener, Seligman).
- Moreover, these theories fail to recognise that both the university and adult learners may be qualitatively different from schools and children, respectively. There is a need to explore flourishing in universities and adult learners in more detail to be able to argue with more certainty how positive education could be realistically and meaningfully applied to this domain and what the unique nature of flourishing may be here.

Through addressing the gaps in knowledge on context-specific flourishing in higher education in the three areas of contextlessness I outlined in Chapter One, I will attempt to work my findings into a preliminary “theory of context-specific flourishing in higher education.” I intend this theory to be primarily for the field of positive and higher education, but hope that the principle of context-specificity as a sort of “antidote” to the problematic nature of abstractionism may be used to inform theory in other applied domains of positive psychology as well.

The preliminary theory of context-specific flourishing in higher education that I will attempt to develop in this thesis was envisaged to have pragmatic utility in two main areas. Firstly, it was anticipated to be able to contribute to a more contextually sensitive positive education for student flourishing in universities. Second, it was anticipated to inform the evaluation of current higher education policy and to aid the development of future higher education policy by highlighting human flourishing as a worthwhile ideal for students in higher education.

The first step in developing this context-specific theory was exploring the context-specific meanings of flourishing in higher education. I will turn to this in Chapter Three.

# CHAPTER THREE

## UNDERSTANDING FLOURISHING: AN INDUCTIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF "FLOURISHING" IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>23</sup>

### 3.1. Abstract

In this chapter, I address the first aspect of contextlessness in positive psychological perspectives on flourishing – contextless conceptualisation. Despite arguments that social sciences converge on the meaning of flourishing, I will attempt to demonstrate that there are both quantitative and qualitative variations in meaning across contexts. Turning to flourishing in the context of education, I will review the major perspectives on student wellbeing and what it means for students to flourish at school and university. Following this I will report the first phase of exploratory research conducted for this thesis. This study involved content analysis of four textual data sets elicited from 222 students at two UK universities. Data were collected via an open-ended questionnaire in which students wrote about their understandings of flourishing, flourishing at university, and the characteristics of flourishing and non-flourishing students. Overall, students' conceptualisations of flourishing *per se* were similar to those proposed by extant positive psychological theories. However, their conceptualisations of flourishing at university and of flourishing and non-flourishing students appeared to demonstrate numerous contextual uniquenesses not apparent in extant global-level theories. This suggests that when a constructionist, context-specific approach is taken, flourishing can be conceptualised with greater contextual detail within the domain of higher education.

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<sup>23</sup> Two earlier versions of this chapter have been published as follows:

Gokcen, N., & Hefferon, K. (2011). Learning to flourish: An inductive content analysis of students' constructions of flourishing in British higher education. *Proceedings of the London International Conference on Education*, 7-10 November 2011 (pp. 162-167). London: Infonomics Society.

Gokcen, N., Hefferon, K., & Attree, E. (2012). University students' constructions of 'flourishing' in British higher education: An inductive content analysis. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2, 1, 1-21.

A supplementary file containing the raw data used in this chapter is available with the second article (Gokcen et al., 2012) and can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v2i1.1.s1>.

At the end of this chapter I will discuss the findings and implications of this study in the contexts of both this thesis and positive psychology.

## **3.2. Conceptualising flourishing**

There are multiple, overlapping definitions and conceptualisations of flourishing. As discussed at the beginning of Chapter One, philosophical perspectives are the first to differ in their conceptualisations of what flourishing is. Nature fulfilment perspectives, such as Aristotle's (350BC/2000), defend a eudaimonic account of flourishing which positions it as a moral byproduct (Elster, 1981) of virtuous intellect and conduct (e.g. Marx, 1959/1988; Leopold, 2007; Younkens, 2008). On the other hand, utilitarian/consequentialist ethics holds that it is a desirable outcome in itself and should be pursued by any means capable of achieving it (e.g. Bentham, 1776/1988; Mill, 1950). Apart from these, numerous other philosophical schools interpret human flourishing in a variety of ways, though as I explained in Chapter One I do not propose to discuss the breadth of such theories here. In this section, my objective is to introduce the study of the concept of flourishing in general and review its development in the social sciences, noting the lack of consensus on its meaning.

### **3.2.1. Increasing interest in flourishing**

In the last few decades, flourishing, and wellbeing in general, have seen a rise in attention in both non-academic and academic arenas. In the press, for example, use of the term "wellbeing" in both traditionally left-wing and traditionally right-wing newspapers in the UK rose from between 25 and 65 mentions in the mid-1980s to early 1990s to between 179 and 665 mentions by the late 1990s to early 2000s (Sointu, 2005). Flourishing and wellbeing have also featured increasingly as a topic of interest in the social and health-allied sciences. For example, between 1980 and 2001, the concept of wellbeing increased in usage across the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, health studies, and biomedicine, with each discipline researching the concept with its own "bias" (Cronin de Chavez, Beckett-Milburn, Parry & Platt, 2005).

Within psychology, research on flourishing broadly defined was largely focused on negative affect and the alleviation of mental illness until the 1970s, after which interest began to emerge in topics such as subjective wellbeing (Diener, 1984; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000) and happiness (e.g. Veenhoven, 1984), psychological wellbeing (e.g. Bradburn, 1969; Ryff, 1989) and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Furthermore, since the early 2000s, the discipline of positive psychology has produced

an immense volume of literature on many important aspects of flourishing (e.g. Sheldon, Kashdan & Steger, 2011).

### **3.2.2. The meaning of flourishing: Is there consensus?**

Diener and Diener (2011) contend that there is “consensus” across social and behavioural sciences on what flourishing is. Specifically, they argue it is a form of “psychosocial prosperity” and has eight components, agreed across disciplines such as psychology and economics, to define human flourishing. These are: social support, public trust, safety/security, tolerance, competence/growth, life satisfaction, positive engagement and low negative affect (Diener & Diener, 2011; Diener et al., 2010). Using this conceptualisation, and measured by Diener et al.’s (2010) “Flourishing Scale,” Diener and Diener (2011) argue changes in psychosocial prosperity within and across nations can be monitored as a supplement to traditional social indicators such as Gross Domestic Product or economic growth to inform public policy.<sup>24</sup>

It is worthwhile to exercise some caution in accepting this claim of transdisciplinary consensus on flourishing. Firstly, consensus on what flourishing is may be somewhat dubious even within positive psychology. As discussed in Chapter One, there are numerous approaches to flourishing in positive psychology, with definitions including positive mental health (high subjective, psychological, and social wellbeing; Keyes, 2002, 2006), psychological wellbeing alone (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), positivity (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) and multidimensional wellbeing incorporating various combinations of these factors (e.g. Diener et al., 2010; Seligman, 2011).

Diener (personal communication, 2010) explains his position by pointing out that all the above approaches have certain elements in common (e.g. good social relationships, a sense of mastery or achievement, etc.), enabling us to extract a set of (empirically established) factors that define flourishing across prevailing theories. Whilst this may be valid for positive psychology, the assertion that *social sciences* converge on a common understanding of flourishing is not necessarily shared by commentators from disciplines outside psychology. For example, Ereaut and Whiting (2008) conducted a review of the term wellbeing as it is used in documents from a wide range of contexts (e.g. government departments, non-governmental organisations, research bodies, public and commercial sector bodies, etc.) and report a high level of

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<sup>24</sup> This is currently being carried out within the framework of the Gallup World Poll (Gallup, Inc., 2012), a worldwide system of national and international social surveys monitoring economic and social wellbeing.

inconsistency in usage both between and within contexts. For example, the authors question whether wellbeing is:

Individual or collective? Subjective or objective? Permanent or temporary? Generic or specific? Reducible to components, or an irreducible holistic totality? Whose responsibility [is wellbeing]? ...A neutral state (nothing wrong) or a positive state (better than neutral)...a state or a process – a place or a journey? An end in itself – or necessary to another end? (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008, p. 5).

According to Ereaut and Whiting, alongside explicitly defined meanings (e.g. legal), wellbeing and related concepts are constantly used with inconsistent implicit, assumed, and implied meanings, such as physical health, mental and/or emotional health, agency and personal responsibility (for wellbeing), resilience, achievement, and skills. The authors argue that the definitions of wellbeing-related concepts are different across the spectrum of political, legal, scientific and other domains of their analysis, indicating, in their view, a multiplicity of dynamic and constantly shifting meanings that are socially and culturally constructed in accordance with “...the weight given at...[any given]...time to different philosophical traditions, world views, and systems of knowledge.” (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008, p. 7).

In a similar vein, Morrow (1999) argues that inconsistencies in the definitions and conceptualisations of wellbeing or human flourishing make it difficult to apply it to specialised populations such as children,<sup>25</sup> suggesting that a key challenge in the conceptualisation of wellbeing is the tendency for many theorists and researchers to treat the concept as if it were a “thing.” The problem of reification is a common human tendency, leading one to think about non-material entities such as culture, society or government as if they were physical, tangible, directly accessible, or otherwise existent in an objective reality rather than a constructed one (see Barton & Hamilton, 2005, and Wenger, 1998, for detailed discussions of reification). Morrow’s (1999) suggestion for addressing this challenge is not only recognising that concepts such as wellbeing and flourishing are constructed by individuals and groups in the contexts of society, culture, and history, but that they are essentially a system of processes and practices – relating to both what these concepts are and how we go about defining them – rather than things. Thus, flourishing may more usefully be viewed as a matter of “people...reproduc[ing] themselves as subjects who measure up to prevalent social norms and values” (Sointu,

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<sup>25</sup> Morrow herself takes a “social capital” approach to the construct, reviewing differences in definition between Coleman, Putnam, and Bourdieu.

2005, p. 272; see also Rose, 1989, 1999), rather than as having a single, fixed meaning equally applicable across different cultures and times.

Through arguments made in social sciences other than psychology, it seems evident that the consensus in the meaning of flourishing asserted by Diener and Diener (2011) is less clear-cut than they might have wished to persuade us of. Rather, despite some degree of common ground shared by positive psychological theories of flourishing, in the wider context of social and health-related sciences, there is considerable plurality in both definitions and conceptualisations across disciplines (Cronin de Chavez et al., 2005) and sectors (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008). So, if the meaning of flourishing differs across contexts, how do these differences manifest?

### **3.3. Flourishing in context**

I argued in Chapter One that the abstractionist ontological perspective (Slife & Richardson, 2008) adopted in positive psychological theories of flourishing makes the theories difficult to apply meaningfully to concrete situations because it is unclear how their components manifest in context-specific ways (for example, what does it mean to have positive affect at a wedding? What about a funeral?). As I argued in the previous section, there are ample arguments in the social sciences that flourishing is defined differently across disciplines, and, in a broader context, across cultures and historical eras. Some theorists (e.g. Burack et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2001) acknowledge that while their proposed definitions or conceptual models of flourishing have a generic nature, they may manifest in specific contexts in unique ways – a relational standpoint. However, even when this is acknowledged, such theories cannot by themselves explain *how* context-specific manifestation occurs because the number of conceivable contexts is virtually infinite. Thus, more in-depth investigations of flourishing in contexts are required. In this section, I will give a few examples of flourishing manifesting differently in different contexts – that is, I will try to demonstrate that depending on the situation and the individuals and groups involved in it, the definitions of flourishing *in situ*, including the things that constitute it, change. Flourishing differs both quantitatively and qualitatively across contexts. I will attempt to demonstrate this difference using examples in the next two sections.

#### **3.3.1. Quantitative differences across contexts**

An example of flourishing differing quantitatively across contexts is the positivity ratio (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Positivity is defined as the ratio of positive emotions to negative emotions experienced in a given time, with higher positivity ratios empirically

demonstrated to be linked to greater flourishing (Fredrickson, 2004, 2009). Losada (1999) examined positivity ratios in effectively and ineffectively functioning business teams<sup>26</sup> in an occupational setting as they engaged in social interactions, finding that higher positivity ratios were consistently associated with aspects of flourishing such as broader behavioural repertoires, greater flexibility and resilience to adversity, more social resources, and optimal functioning (see also Losada & Heaphy, 2004). Within the context of business teams in occupational settings, the minimum optimal positivity ratio required to reach dynamics exhibited by flourishing teams is 2.9 (i.e. approximately three instances of positive communication to every instance of negative communication) (Losada, 1999). Previously, Gottman (1994) explored positivity ratios in the context of marriage. In observation of 73 married couples discussing an area of conflict in their relationships, average positivity ratios for couples in flourishing marriages were 4.7 for overt emotions and 5.1 for verbal communication, while those for couples in languishing marriages were 0.7 and 0.9, respectively. Thus, in the context of intimate relationships the importance of positivity is quantitatively different from the context of business team performance, with marriages requiring greater positivity, on average, to flourish, in comparison with business teams.

### **3.3.2. Qualitative differences across contexts**

Qualitative differences in flourishing also exist (e.g. differences in conceptual nature, such as the personal qualities or behaviours that are deemed to constitute or enable it). An example of this is the unique definitions and characteristics applied to wellbeing-related concepts among children and youth (who might be considered to constitute a unique sub-population), which research has shown tend to exhibit differences from traditional understandings of wellness. As White and Wyn (2004) note, “young people are themselves defining ‘health’ and wellbeing in ways that move well beyond the traditional understanding and that challenge the organisations and jurisdictions that are charged with treating and preventing their ill-health.” (p. 211). Bourke and Geldens (2007) conducted both quantitative and qualitative explorations of the meanings attached to wellbeing by 91 young people aged 16-24 at a youth centre in rural Australia and found that common themes overlapped with generic theories (e.g. relationships, psychological/emotional wellness, etc.). However, the richness of interview data revealed unique details about the way these themes were interpreted by young people

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<sup>26</sup> Effectiveness of functioning was defined as the degree to which team members communicated with one another positively, e.g. in their reactions to other team members’ suggestions.

and the context-specific characteristics such interpretations included. For example, in the relationships theme, interpretations centred on supportiveness in parents, friends, teachers, etc. – factors conceivably overlapping with generic theories of flourishing. However, some entirely unique ideas also emerged, such as “pressure” (usually of balancing work, school, and social life) which appeared to be a concept salient for young people as a specialised population.

Similarly to Bourke and Geldens, Kirk (2012) investigated the factors that constitute wellbeing for children with Down Syndrome and found that these were different from the conceptualisations of wellbeing that prevail for both adults and normally developing<sup>27</sup> children. For example, key factors associated with wellbeing for children with Down Syndrome included communication (for example, between the children and parents or between parents and teachers). Whilst communication is also considered generally important in the wellbeing of normally developing children, it was found to apply in unique ways to children with Down Syndrome. For instance, communication for children with Down Syndrome was found to depend on language acquisition, which is often delayed by Down Syndrome, and the dependence on language acquisition in turn with the allocation of adequate specialist resources to the children’s learning environments at home and school (see also Morrison & Weijers, 2012, for a discussion of the wider implications for child policy).

Building on the examples given thereover, I argue that global theories of flourishing, whilst presenting some of the elements of wellbeing that are shared between diverse cultural and historical contexts across populations, are limited in their capacity to explain the unique ways such elements come about in applied settings. Other, more in-depth investigations of flourishing-in-context have gone some way in showing how the nature of wellbeing, and the factors important for it, change from situation to situation and from population to population. In the next section, I will examine some of the key literature surrounding flourishing in the context of education.

### **3.4. Flourishing in the context of education**

What does it mean to flourish in education? How does flourishing manifest in everyday situations in educational settings? What personal qualities or behaviours characterise flourishing students? The endeavour to understand, define and conceptualise flourishing

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<sup>27</sup>I imply no value judgements regarding children with Down Syndrome when juxtaposing them with “normally developing” children.

in students – from specific constructs such as skills development to wider, overarching ones like wellbeing – is not new. As I noted in Chapter Two, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, education-based and other researchers have shown increasing interest in moving learning theories, and pedagogy and educational practice in general, beyond the traditional boundaries of instructor-to-student knowledge transmission and academic performance to embrace “whole child” development as a vital goal of contemporary education (e.g. Noddings, 1995a; Palmer, 2003). The whole child development approach holds that the arenas of formal (e.g. school) and informal (e.g. home/family environment) education collectively must be focused upon developing students as well-rounded individuals with appropriate cognitive, social, and emotional skills and a variety of positive coping strategies and psychological resources (Masters, 2004; Noddings, 1995a), rather than simply impart knowledge in a uni-directional manner. Conceptualising the development of the whole child thus necessitated consideration of the many macro- and meso-level factors and wider contexts (environmental, sociocultural, etc.) affecting children’s development that go beyond the simple Cartesian mind-body dualism implicated in traditional (cognitive) learning theories (e.g. Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Whole child development approaches aiming to conceptualise wider flourishing of individuals in contexts have been developed into large-scale theoretical frameworks such as ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) and developmental systems theory (e.g. Sameroff, 1983). In this section, I will examine a variety of different understandings of student wellbeing/flourishing at compulsory level and higher education.

### **3.4.1. Flourishing in compulsory level education**

Current literature on the definition/conceptualisation of student wellbeing, including flourishing, is diverse and far-reaching. For example, in a longitudinal study examining the predictive power of having flourished at secondary school over physical and mental health in adulthood, Hammond and Feinstein (2006) defined “flourishing at school” as a combination of “...functioning well intellectually, psychologically and socially...” (p. i) and operationalised this using measures of academic attainment and engagement. Masters (2004) proposes five facets of student flourishing in educational contexts, relating to physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. However, he argues the facets cannot be meaningfully delineated from one another and that instead they operate as a balanced whole in which students’ growth and development is a continuous, dynamic process. In a similar vein, Clement (2010) conceptualises student flourishing as holistic skill development, arguing that flourishing must be embedded

into educational environments as a core value, which in turn plays a vital role in the quality of students' learning experiences. Other conceptualisations of flourishing in education include flourishing as engagement (academic, behavioural, cognitive, and psychological; Reschly, Huebner, Appleton & Antaramian, 2008), and as a notion akin to "competence and wellness" (Burack et al., 2007).

Within school contexts the concept of thriving has also received attention from researchers and it is worth noting the possible relationships between this concept and flourishing. The term thriving was initially used by Peter Benson (1990) to denote the presence of a set of "developmental assets," or positive coping skills and resources, utilised by adolescents and young people to avoid high-risk behaviours, be resilient in adverse situations, and prosper (e.g. Benson & Scales, 2009; Theokas, Almerigi, Lerner, Dowling, Benson, Scales et al., 2005). Benson and Scales (2009) acknowledge some conceptual similarities between thriving and Keyes' (2002) conception of flourishing as mental health, noting that Keyes' (2007a) components of subjective, psychological and social wellbeing overlap considerably with aspects of thriving such as positive emotionality, motivation, purpose, prosocial orientation, and supports provided by others. However, they propose four differences. These are:

- Explicit emphasis on spiritual development as an aspect of thriving: Benson and Scales (2009) argue that Keyes' conception of flourishing may include spiritual development implicitly, but that thriving places greater, explicit emphasis on this process;
- Greater emphasis on outreach to others, or self-transcendence, in thriving: Benson and Scales contend that their conception of thriving makes explicit reference to the responsibility to help or contribute to the wellbeing of others or causes greater than oneself, whilst arguing this is less explicit in Keyes' flourishing;
- Thriving as an outgrowth of the individual's talents and interests: According to Benson and Scales, the prosocial element of thriving mentioned above proceeds from individual differences in talents/interests, whereas no such link appears to be made by Keyes; and
- Thriving as an interactive process between individuals and context: Perhaps the most significant distinction made between thriving and flourishing is the issue of context. Benson and Scales state that their "...concept of thriving is explicitly rooted in the principles of developmental systems theory and applied developmental science." (2009, p. 94). Thus, they argue, thriving is inherently

enabled by and within wider contexts of environments, relationships, and institutions. Crucially, no such acknowledgement of contexts is explicitly made in Keyes' conception of flourishing or, as I argued in Chapter One, in other major theories of flourishing within positive psychology.

### **3.4.2. Flourishing in higher education**

A wide range of work exists on definitions of flourishing in higher education. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, it has been acknowledged by contemporary learning theorists that what constitutes wellbeing in educational settings for adult learners is often different from what constitutes it for students at other levels of education (e.g. Knowles, 1968; Merriam, 2001). Research on university students' wellbeing has devoted considerable attention to the wellbeing of students on particular degree courses or within particular subject areas (e.g. Hall, 2009, focused on the psychological wellbeing of law students and Sanders & Sander, 2007, compared psychology and medicine students). Such research has largely aimed to encourage shifts in academic practice and culture that influence wellbeing outcomes for students in those areas.

Laurie Schreiner (e.g. Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson & Pothoven, 2009; Schreiner, Primrose, Kammer, Quick & Petridis, 2012) has researched extensively on the topic of thriving in higher education settings in the US, and acknowledges conceptual similarity of "college thriving" with the developmental thriving described by Benson (1990), although exact equivalence is unlikely because of discrepancies in (the manner of) definition. Schreiner's thriving, more importantly, is a concept developed specifically for a higher education context using a combination of factors important for both wellbeing in general (e.g. life satisfaction, positive emotions) and for effective functioning in educational settings (e.g. engaged learning, self- and effort regulation; see Pintrich, 2000, and Schreiner & Louis, 2006). Like Benson and Scales (2009), Schreiner compares her thriving with Keyes' (2002; Keyes & Haidt, 2003) conceptualisation of flourishing as mental health (emotional vitality and positive functioning). She argues that whilst flourishing in higher education might be defined as rising to academic challenges, participating in active/collaborative learning and enriching educational experiences, and contributing to a supportive campus environment (Ambler, 2006), thriving is "more holistic" (Schreiner et al., 2012, slide 11), being defined as "engaged learning, academic success, citizenship and openness to diversity" (slide 11).

Although Schreiner's thriving in higher education has conceptual overlap with the "flourishing in higher education" I describe in this thesis, there are also important

differences, particularly in the ontological and epistemological positions adopted in the development of the concepts and the purpose for which they were developed. Briefly, I argue that the flourishing described in this thesis is different from both Benson's (1990) and Schreiner's (Schreiner et al., 2012) conceptions of thriving because of its systematic derivation from socially constructed understandings rather than theoretical definitions. However, apart from this difference in ontological and epistemological position I do not believe it is pragmatic to distinguish thriving from flourishing using what might be argued to be pedantic discrepancies in definition. In other words, the flourishing I present in this thesis differs from the two accounts of thriving I have described first and foremost through the manner in which it is defined, and less through the actual resultant definition, though some difference here also exist.

### **3.5. Approaches to understanding flourishing**

#### **3.5.1. The quantitative-empirical research paradigm**

As discussed in Chapter One, it has been argued that the only legitimate method of inquiry into positive psychological phenomena is via the quantitative-empirical research paradigm (Seligman, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001), and the vast majority of research in the field has adhered to this tenet (though there are some noteworthy exceptions; see for instance Lu and Shih's [1997] content analytic study of Taiwanese residents' conceptualisations of happiness). Whilst this approach has the capacity to operationalise variables and examine statistical relationships between them, it lacks the capacity to meaningfully define them, except by means not derived from valid social/cultural understandings, such as from existing theoretical literature or arbitrary definitions. In other words, wellbeing-related constructs in positive psychology, such as flourishing, have been defined in ways not directly embedded within a relational ontological perspective (Slife & Richardson, 2008), meaning the complex influences of the contexts of flourishing are largely not taken into account in traditional empirical research. Thus, much richness is detracted from the meaning of flourishing when definitions are applied in a top-down fashion or without consideration of context.<sup>28</sup>

#### **3.5.2. The qualitative-constructionist research paradigm**

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<sup>28</sup> Speaking in the context of learning theories, Lave (1993, 1996) argues that simply adding a "situation" factor to an otherwise purely individual-oriented theory is insufficient to understand the dynamics between individuals and their (cultural or historical) environments; Instead, there is a need to recognise the all-encompassing nature of macro-level contextual factors in which phenomena occur. Thus, phenomena such as learning, flourishing etc. are each a "social practice" rather than purely intrinsic (e.g. cognitive) phenomena.

To gain more detailed understandings of the ways flourishing manifests in concrete situations, particularly as it is rooted in *people's* understandings, one need turn to the main “dissident” of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s (2001) empirical approach: The qualitative-constructionist research paradigm. One of the central views of this approach is that, rather than existing universally in an objective reality, concepts and phenomena are constructed by individuals when they interact with one another and under the influences of the broader contexts of time and culture, which are themselves dynamic constructions of meaning (Burr, 2003). Burr (2003) gives the classic example of homosexuality to exemplify this:

Prior to 1973 homosexuality was a disease and was classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). Following changes in social attitudes and campaigning by gay activists the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove it; diseases are not simply objectively defined medical entities but social ones (p. 40, emphasis in original).

Apart from holding the view that concepts are socially constructed rather than universally existent, the qualitative-constructionist paradigm also places importance on the role of language in the social construction of concepts’ meanings, since language is the means through which individuals interact with one another, not only to express their thoughts and feelings, but also to actively construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct meanings in dialogue. Important parallels can be drawn between the social constructionist approach outlined by Burr and the relational ontology proposed by Slife and Richardson (2008). For example, a relational ontological perspective is inherent in the social constructionist assumption that a particular piece of knowledge (e.g. the meaning of a concept or word) is specific to the context in which it is constructed, and that it may well be less meaningful in other contexts. Hence, in Burr’s example the meaning of homosexuality changes from one cultural and historical context to another as a function of the manner in which such meaning is constructed.

Thus, in exploring the way concepts such as wellbeing or flourishing are defined and conceptualised, it is important to consider both the specificity of the meanings to particular groups of people in particular cultural and historical contexts, and the manifestation of such meanings in the language used by such people as the “bricks” with which they construct such meaning together.

### **3.6. Rationale and aims for this study**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, although it has been claimed that consensus exists across the social sciences regarding what flourishing means, considerable evidence casts

doubt over this. Variation in meaning is apparent across numerous contexts. This variation demonstrates that although prevailing global-level theories of flourishing capture basic commonalities of overall wellbeing, they remain unable to provide details as to the way flourishing comes about in concrete situations and its uniquenesses in particular contexts, such as educational settings. This is largely because the quantitative-empirical paradigm utilised in developing these theories lacks the capacity to define concepts in a manner grounded in socially constructed understandings. In order to address this gap in the existing literature, I set out to develop a definition and conceptualisation of human flourishing in the context of present-day UK higher education. Here, I adopt a broadly social constructionist approach, following Burr (2003), beginning with the key assumptions that the manifestation of flourishing as it pertains to this context (a) can be most meaningfully explored through acknowledging its “constructedness” and (b) is accessible primarily in the way it is expressed in language. This inductive approach was anticipated to offer a richer, more detailed understanding of the way students conceive of their own and their peers’ flourishing, and was intended to complement existing global-level theories of flourishing by illustrating the context-specific uniquenesses and idiosyncrasies of flourishing at university.

This study was carried out to address the first facet of contextlessness in theories of flourishing that I outlined in Chapter One – contextless conceptualisation.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, I adopted three research questions:

- How do students in present-day UK higher education construct the concept of flourishing?
- How do they construct the concept of flourishing at university?
- How do they characterise flourishing versus non-flourishing students?

### **3.7. Method**

In this section, I will discuss the methodological and practical considerations of the present study. First, I will introduce content analysis and present a justification for its selection for use in the present study. Next, I will review the sampling strategy and participants. Finally, I will discuss and exemplify the coding strategy used to analyse the data.

#### **3.7.1. Origins of content analysis**

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<sup>29</sup> It is perhaps worth adding that, to the best of my knowledge, this was the first qualitatively-oriented exploration of flourishing in any higher education context.

Content analysis is a data analysis technique in which the main focus is to investigate the “content” of text (for example, speeches, interviews, newspaper articles, TV programmes) in order to make inferences about the context(s) in which the text was produced (for example, about cultural understandings apparent in the text, or characteristics or circumstances of the author or audience) (Krippendorff, 2004). For example, the technique is often used in political science to study ideology and rhetoric by analysing the trends in usage of certain words (e.g. “ideal,” “people,” “truth”) in presidential speeches (see Lim, 2002).

Content analysis was developed by US researchers in the area of communications during World War II, when it was used in the analysis of political texts to detect the presence of propaganda (Devi Prasad, 2008). However, its methodological roots have been traced back as far as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when an early precursor of it was used in Scandinavia (Rosengren, 1981). Because its primary use during World War II was to provide US authorities with succinct, definitive intelligence about enemy operations, content analysis was originally purely quantitative – that is, primarily concerned with quantifying texts in terms of word frequency. Hence, it utilised strict, *a priori*<sup>30</sup> coding and an empirical epistemological approach, to “reveal” or “discover” meanings of the manifest content of texts. Thus, early theorists defined content analysis with this quantitative-empirical orientation. For instance, Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as “...a research technique for the *objective*, systematic, and *quantitative* description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18, emphasis added). Similarly, Stone, Dunphy, Smith and Ogilvie (1966) asserted that it is “...any research technique for making inferences by systematically and *objectively* identifying specified characteristics within text” (p. 5, with credit given to Dr Ole Holsti, emphasis added).

### **3.7.2. Qualitative content analysis**

In recent years, content analysis has experienced an explosion of use across a huge number of disciplines outside communications research (most notably psychology, sociology, business, law, and nursing). Its application in particular to social sciences has led to the emergence of qualitative (or inductive) content analysis as a distinct form of the technique (e.g. Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative content analysis is defined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) as “...a research method for

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<sup>30</sup> In the context of experimental methods, *a priori* may be defined as “before the fact” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 11), or determined/established before data analysis begins and independently of what the data may contain.

the *subjective interpretation* of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.” (p. 1278, emphasis added). Here, content analysis is characterised as a method of analysing text in order to arrive at meanings associated with its content, but, contrary to quantitative-empirical approaches to content analysis, qualitative content analysis asserts that the meanings of text are not universally apparent (that is, the content of text does not represent the same meaning for everyone; it cannot necessarily be read objectively). Thus, in order to arrive at meaning, the researcher must engage in a process of subjective interpretation – an “interaction” between the researcher and text in which the researcher constructs meanings of the content of the text.

Because the subjective interpretation used in qualitative content analysis affirms that meanings inferred from text are *constructed* (by the researcher in interaction with the text, in the broader contexts of time and culture) rather than observed, this approach may be broadly regarded as social constructionist in nature (Burr, 2003). However, as with all qualitative research methodologies, qualitative content analysis is systematic – that is, the analysis process is consistent and rigorously applied – and this is a quality that it shares with its quantitative counterpart (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Despite the delineation of quantitative and qualitative content analyses, numerous commentators have expressed doubt as to the theoretical or pragmatic usefulness of separating the two, pointing out that, essentially, all readings of a text are at least somewhat subjective. Therefore, the meanings emerging from them can only at best be “what we agree is true” rather than “what is true”<sup>31</sup> (Krippendorf, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002). In agreement with this point, I prefer here to offer Weber’s (1985) definition of content analysis, which is more inclusive of the various interpretations of content analysis and, in my view, better fits the present study because of its versatility and recognition of variation in the analysis process:

Content analysis is a research methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from a text. These inferences are about the sender(s) of message, the message itself, or the audience of a message. *The rules of this inferential process vary with the theoretical and substantive interests of the investigator...* (p. 9, emphasis added).

The use of qualitative content analysis in this study necessitates some consideration of how quality is determined when using this technique. I will turn to this in the next section.

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<sup>31</sup> This is known as ‘intersubjectivity’ and is perhaps a more realistic goal for establishing ‘validity’ of analyses than ‘objectivity’. I discuss issues of reliability and validity in content analysis in section 3.7.3.

### **3.7.3. Determining quality in qualitative content analysis**

#### **3.7.3.1. What is “quality” in research?**

When I use the term “quality,” I mean the concepts traditionally referred to as “validity” and “reliability” in the quantitative-empirical research paradigm. These concepts refer to, respectively, the extent to which empirical findings truly signify what they are purported to signify, and the extent to which such findings are appropriately consistent or replicable across time and place (e.g. Davis & Bremner, 2006). Some theorists have applied different terms to refer to quality within qualitative research, such as “credibility,” “dependability,” “transferability,” and “trustworthiness” (e.g. Berg & Welander Hansson, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1995; Polit & Hungler, 1999). Presumably, these different terms have been used to distinguish the constructionist/subjectivist nature of quality in qualitative research from the realist/objectivist connotations of the terms used in quantitative research, though the use of different terms is not justified by some theorists (e.g. Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Conversely, Long and Johnson (2000) argue that the use of different labels for quality in quantitative and qualitative research has little utility because the inherent meaning of quality is the same regardless of research paradigm. Concurring with this appeal for simplicity, I will refer in this chapter and throughout the thesis to “quality” when discussing issues of reliability/validity or trustworthiness.

#### **3.7.3.2. Quality in qualitative content analysis**

Although qualitative research in general adopts a subjectivist perspective and does not attempt to be objective in the manner empirical research does, this does not mean that it is conducted haphazardly or on the whim of the researcher. Rather, qualitative research follows the same degree of rigour and systematic analysis as quantitative research, and in addition requires a greater degree of reflection (Mays & Pope, 2000). Major papers on qualitative content analysis in particular tend to converge on the following eight principles concerning the determination of the quality of research using this technique.

##### ***3.7.3.2.1. Appropriate diversity in participants and sample***

Graneheim and Lundman (2004) point out that in order to ensure the quality of both data and findings in qualitative content analysis studies, one of the first issues requiring consideration is the selection of an appropriately diverse sample. This does not necessarily mean samples must be extremely diverse or representative of the general public; rather it refers to the need for the range and number of participants to be appropriate for yielding data of sufficient quantity and quality to explore answers to the research question.

#### **3.7.3.2.2. *Appropriate collection method and amount of data***

For analysis and inference to be meaningful, data in qualitative content analysis studies must be collected in an appropriate manner and quantity. In this case, “appropriate” refers to the ability of the data collection method to yield the type of data best for the exploration of the research question and in a quantity that is able to provide insight from a breadth of relevant perspectives (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

#### **3.7.3.2.3. *Selection of appropriate unit of meaning and rigorous analysis***

As with all qualitative research, a variety of analysis processes exist for different forms of qualitative content analysis (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). However, regardless of the specific strand of analysis adopted, the process of coding data, including the units of meaning used (e.g. words/phrases, sentences, paragraphs), must be rigorous and consistent throughout the entirety of the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

#### **3.7.3.2.4. *Prolonged engagement with the data***

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), a key requirement for high quality content analysis is prolonged (intensive) engagement with the data during the analysis process. This may include, for example, the use of manual coding as opposed to software-assisted analysis, and repeated in-depth reading of, and reflection on, the data (see Lundy, 2008).

#### **3.7.3.2.5. *Dialogue among co-researchers***

Due to the subjective nature of qualitative content analysis, the process of establishing inter-coder reliability (statistical similarity between the analyses of the same data set by two independent coders) that is used in quantitative content analysis is not normally used. However, numerous content analysis theorists highlight the importance of establishing the quality of qualitative content analysis through in-depth dialogue on the analyses between researchers (e.g. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Thomas, 2006; Woods & Catanzaro, 1988). Use of dialogue in this manner enables the principal researcher to gain new or alternative understandings of the analysis.

#### **3.7.3.2.6. *Fair representation of data***

Graneheim and Lundman (2004) note that analysis and findings in qualitative content analysis studies must fairly represent the meanings apparent and inherent in the data. This implies striking a reasonable balance between interpretation and (superficial) description. Ideally, findings will neither ignore data relevant to the research issue at hand nor “drag in” data that is irrelevant.

#### **3.7.3.2.7. *Recognition of changes in data and analysis over time***

In instances where data is collected over an extended period of time, the nature of these data may exhibit changes as a function of pertinent social, political, or other changes in the context of the research. For example, data on opinions on domestic violence collected from young women before and after a major domestic violence incident is reported in the press may differ considerably. Also, the researcher conducting the content analysis will necessarily experience changes in his or her perceptions of both newly incoming data and the data set as a whole as his or her engagement with the data will deepen throughout the analysis process. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) argue it is important to acknowledge and reflect on these changes as an inevitable aspect of the analysis process.

#### ***3.7.3.2.8. Open and clear exposition of the analysis and context of the research***

The establishment of quality in qualitative research does not end with deliberation among co-researchers. Instead, the process of ensuring quality should be continued by presenting the analysis and wider context of the research to readers in a manner that is detailed and informative. This enables the quality of the analysis to be considered and (re)evaluated by the wider research community (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

I will return to the above considerations of quality in qualitative content analysis later in this chapter, when reporting the analysis and in the discussion, to explain how each was adhered to.

### **3.7.4. Justifying the use of content analysis**

Qualitative content analysis was selected as an appropriate methodological approach in this study for three reasons. These must be considered within the contexts of the present study's aims and of the wider aims and purposes of the thesis.

#### **3.7.4.1. Capacity to enable inferences about context**

An important feature of content analysis is its capacity to enable the researcher to make inferences about the context of a text based upon its content (both when the context is regarded as inherent and as constructed) (Krippendorff, 2004). Due to the aim in this study to explore the contextual characteristics of flourishing in a higher education setting, I required a methodology in which data from students could be analysed to gain insight into such contextual characteristics (rather than, for example, insight into students' phenomenological experience of flourishing). The inferential connections made in content analysis between text and content therefore made it possible for me to gain insight into the context in which I collected my data (and, simultaneously, the

context in which students were operating and defining flourishing), which in turn led to a context-specific definition of the construct of interest.

#### **3.7.4.2. Capacity to be used on data from broad/diverse samples**

Qualitative content analysis is somewhat different from “traditional” qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory or discourse analysis in that it does not necessarily require very rich/in-depth data from selective samples. Instead, it can be used effectively on data that is less rich, but more diverse – that is, from a larger, more varied sample (see Berelson, 1952). This was important in the selection of this methodology in light of the connections between the present study and those discussed in Chapter Four, which concern the development of a context-specific psychometric measure of flourishing. Specifically, because psychometric scales must generally be relevant/applicable for use with whole populations (even if such populations are specialised), they must be developed from understandings of their target constructs that are reasonably representative of the populations to which they apply. Here, because I sought to develop this understanding inductively, I required a qualitative methodology that could be used with less rich, more diverse data gathered from a larger sample of students for the purpose of developing my understanding in a manner more representative of a range of students’ constructions of flourishing. In this case, using a more in-depth methodology on rich data from a selective sample would have yielded a more detailed understanding of flourishing, but only as it pertained to a select few students.

#### **3.7.4.3. Capacity to “let the text talk”**

A final reason for choosing qualitative content analysis was its capacity to “let the text talk” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 111). Contrary to quantitative-empirical approaches to content analysis, qualitative content analysis bears no requirement to use an *a priori* coding scheme on the data. Instead, the coding scheme is developed *as* the data is analysed, being constantly revised to fit the data throughout the process. Thus, no pre-determined theoretical perspective is imposed upon the data, enabling the emerging analysis to be grounded in the data rather than the data being moulded to fit an imposed theory.

Whilst it is acknowledged inductive analyses of this sort can never be purely derived from the data because of the necessity for interpretation on the part of the researcher, qualitative content analysis was still felt to be closely aligned with the general social constructionist approach of the study, particularly because it foregoes the assumption that any given empirically established theory must be used as a framework

for exploring lay/constructed understandings of a concept. In this respect, Graneheim and Lundman (2004) call the methodology a kind of “balancing act,” noting that “On one hand, it is impossible and undesirable for the researcher not to add a particular perspective to the phenomena under study. On the other hand, the researcher must...not impute meaning that is not there.” (p. 111).

### **3.7.5. Alternative methodologies**

Whilst reasons for rejecting the use of methodologies assuming abstractionist/realist ontological and empiricist epistemological stances were discussed at length earlier (see Chapter One), some clarification is needed here as to why qualitative content analysis was selected as opposed to other qualitative methodologies. These other methodologies include, primarily, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Thematic Analysis, Grounded Theory and Discourse Analysis. I will first give a brief overview of each of these methodologies, and then present my reasons for declining them.

#### **3.7.5.1. Overview of alternative methodologies**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is broadly a phenomenologically positioned methodology interested in the ways individuals experience and make sense of phenomena (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). It regards people as the expert (ideal source of data) of their own understandings of themselves and their perceptions of the world, with its primary focus being on the unique *experience* of the individual (qualia, or the experience of “what it’s like”) rather than attempting to develop an understanding of a concept.

Thematic Analysis has only recently been developed as a coherent form of methodology, previously being used as an umbrella term for a variety of related qualitative methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its process of analysis is similar to that used in the present study – coding qualitative data to form coherent themes that emerge from commonalities in people’s accounts – as it aims to capture common themes or narratives running through individuals’ experiences of phenomena.

Grounded Theory was developed within the discipline of sociology in the 1960s, and was originally conceived as a purely inductive methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Its primary aim is theory development, though with particular focus on social processes. Data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously, with new data being compared with existing data on an ongoing basis. Over time Grounded Theory has become somewhat divided in its theoretical stance, breaking off into Glaserian, Straussian, and now also constructionist strands (see Charmaz, 1995, 2000, 2001).

Discourse Analysis is a discursive methodology concerned with identifying and interpreting the manifestations of discourses (socially constructed ‘ideas’ about the world) in the language used by individuals and groups in interaction (Hodges, Kuper & Reeves, 2008). Two major forms of Discourse Analysis exist: Wittgensteinian and Foucauldian. Wittgenstein’s Discourse Analysis, discursive psychology (e.g. Potter, 2001), focuses upon the way language enables social action, or the way in which certain forms of language use construct and implicate social action or practices in the world. In another vein, Foucauldian discourse analysis (e.g. Diaz-Bone, 2003) is concerned with revealing and interpreting social power structures manifest or latent in language.

### **3.7.5.2. Reasons for declining alternative methodologies**

Broadly, I will present two reasons for declining these alternative methodologies. These concern their data and sampling requirements and the (in)congruence between their underlying purposes and the aims of the present study.

#### **3.7.5.2.1. Data and sampling requirements**

All four alternative methodologies are most effectively used on rich but selective data.

Regardless of whether they adopt a phenomenological, discursive, or general approach, these methodologies are best suited to application on linguistically “rich” data, such as interviews or focus group transcripts, or other in-depth textual data. Because of the required richness, sample sizes in studies utilising “deep” methodologies are frequently small, ranging from single case studies to groups of about ten (e.g. in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Smith & Eatough, 2006), though in some cases samples may be larger (e.g. if focus groups are being used as a data collection method or if the purpose of the study is more to extract information for practical reasons than for exploring participants’ experiences).

Whilst rich data from individual participants allows more detailed, coherent narratives to be developed regarding participants’ experiences, its use is curtailed by the limited number of participants from whom such data can be collected. This presents a problem for the present study, which required “broad” data from a range of participants rather than rich data from only a small sample. Thus, the aim of the present study to explore the *breadth* of definitions of flourishing, rather than *depth*, meant that to utilise any of these deeper methodologies would have been antithetical both to their optimal data richness (rich data) and their sampling capacity (small sample size).

#### **3.7.5.2.2. (In)congruence between methodological purpose and study aims**

The second reason for declining the above methodologies was that their theoretical purposes, or functions, were at least somewhat incongruent with the focus of the present study.

For example, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is rooted in phenomenological philosophy and is primarily concerned with describing and interpreting individuals' experiences, not the development of the meanings of concepts. Thematic Analysis, although less strictly bound to either phenomenological or discursive perspectives, is also concerned with (commonalities in) individuals' experiences and in developing a narrative that "tells their story." Grounded Theory was declined because of its focus upon social processes and practices rather than on definitions, concepts, or the social construction of meanings. Finally, the discursive methodologies were felt to be incongruent with the present study's aims because of their focus on identifying and developing discourses rather than practically applicable definitions or conceptualisations of words.

### **3.7.6. Sampling strategy and participants**

As discussed above, when establishing the sampling strategy it was necessary to bear in mind the connection between this study and the scale development work reported in Chapter Four, specifically the necessity for a broad range of data from diverse students.

Obtaining data from a broad sample was preferable because of its capacity to yield a broader range of ideas as to the way students define flourishing, in comparison to using a smaller, more selective sample. Data from a larger sample would therefore lead to a more comprehensive theoretical platform on which to base later scale item development. Thus, an initial target sample size of between 200 and 250 students was set. I acknowledge this target was not set with adherence to a specific theoretical recommendation. However, bearing in mind the first and second principles for ensuring quality that I mentioned in sections 3.7.3.2.1-2, the target range was negotiated with guidance from Dr Kate Hefferon and was felt to represent a sound balance between diversity of student perspectives and practical manageability. Furthermore, it was reasoned that since the coding and analysis process would be occurring simultaneously with data collection, the nature of the data could be used to guide later decisions regarding when to stop data collection, for example at a point when "theoretical saturation"<sup>32</sup> appeared to have been reached.

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<sup>32</sup> Theoretical saturation is a concept borrowed from Grounded Theory but often used in the coding process of other qualitative methodologies. It refers to the point in the analysis process at which the

Ethical approval to carry out the study was granted by the University of East London Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix A). Students were recruited “in the field.” This was primarily carried out by paying guest visits to lectures and seminars on university campuses to publicise the study. A brief verbal and written introduction to the study was given (see Appendix B for the “Information Sheet”), and interested students then signed informed consent forms for their participation (see Appendix C). Data collection was carried out in class (described in section 3.7.7 below).

The final sample (henceforth “Sample 1”) included 222 students enrolled on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses (subjects included psychology, engineering, computing, management, sport and exercise science and sports therapy) across three campuses of two post-1992 (former polytechnic) universities in the south-east of England. The universities were selected for convenience of sampling opportunities through my personal affiliation with lecturers employed within them, although sampling within the universities was largely opportunistic. The students’ gender distribution was approximately equal (95 males, 92 females, 35 no data provided) and their ages ranged from 18 to 52 (of 213 valid<sup>33</sup> cases:  $M=25.9$ ,  $SD=7.77$ ). Although students were not asked to disclose their ethnic background or nationalities, they were recruited from institutions known to be inclusive of ethnically diverse student populations (Business in the Community, 2010). Of the 185 students who reported their mode of study, 156 (84.3%) identified themselves as studying full time.

### **3.7.7. Data collection method and questionnaire format**

In line with the theoretical necessity for broad, diverse data rather than rich and selective, data collection was facilitated through the distribution of a purpose-written questionnaire (see Appendix D). Demographic data was entered at the top of the questionnaire. The main body of the questionnaire included two questions and two prompts:

- (a) What does “flourishing” mean?
- (b) What does it mean to flourish at university?
- (c) Please list the characteristics of a student who is flourishing at university.

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*«Continued from previous page*

themes or concepts emerging from the data are coherent and well-narrated without the necessity to collect further data, for example when new data confirms the analysis and does not add anything new (see Holton, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use the term “valid” to mean “available.” Thus, “valid cases” refers to cases in which data were available, “valid comments” refers to cases in which textual data was given by participants, etc.

(d) Please list the characteristics of a student who is not flourishing at university.

Item (a) was included in order to compare students' understandings of flourishing on its own with the understandings postulated by positive psychological theories. Item (b) was included to explore students' understandings of flourishing at university. It was also envisioned that findings emerging from responses to items (a) and (b) could be compared with one another to explore the similarities and differences between students' understandings of flourishing in general and flourishing at university. Items (c) and (d) were included to further explore students' understandings of student flourishing and the particular manner in which it manifests or does not manifest. The inclusion of these particular questionnaire items was felt to provide a relevant range of data regarding students' understandings of flourishing.

The texts of students' written responses to the questionnaire items above formed four separate data sets; one in response to each item. Hereafter, data sets associated with items (a) through (d) above are referred to as Data Set 1 through 4, respectively.

### **3.7.8. Coding strategy**

Data sets obtained in response to each questionnaire item were analysed separately. In all data sets, a single inductive coding strategy was used as opposed to traditional deductive analysis. The coding procedure followed the recommendations given by Hsieh and Shannon (2005, see pp. 1279-1281) for conventional qualitative content analysis. First, all data sets were read through in their entirety to gain initial insight into the data and get a sense of the "whole" (Tesch, 1990). In the second reading, words and phrases appearing to capture distinct meanings were manually highlighted and used to derive a list of initial codes (Morgan, 1993). Throughout this process, emerging codes were constantly revised to reflect and accommodate new meanings encountered in the data. Following this, an initial analysis was carried out in which thoughts on the data were noted and codes were arranged into tentative groups representing 'concepts' (referred to as "clusters" by Hsieh and Shannon), or sub-themes containing internally coherent groups of codes. In turn, concepts were then connected ("axial coding") to form overarching themes or "categories" based on meaningful commonalities between concepts. Finally, codes, concepts, and categories were assembled into "codebooks" for each data set to illustrate theoretical derivation and connection of concepts and categories with examples of words, phrases, and direct quotations taken from the data.

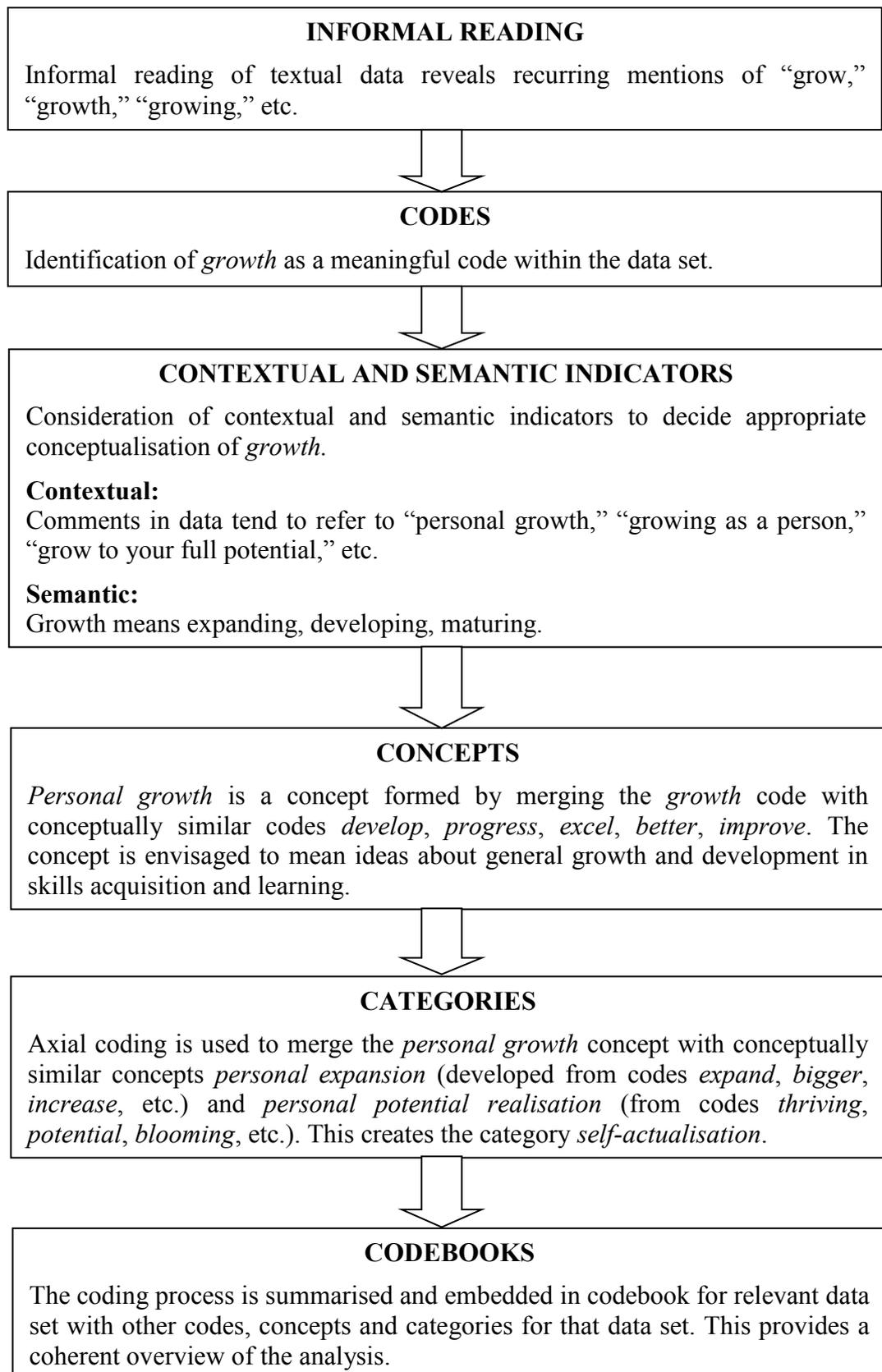
In order for the analysis to remain grounded in the data (i.e. constructionist), virtually all text in the four data sets was included in the analyses, leaving only some

prepositions (e.g. *in, on*) and some pronouns (e.g. *he, she*) excluded. Thus, the analysis was largely exhaustive.

Figure 3.1 (p. 85) depicts the analysis process visually. Here, the keyword “grow” (or variations thereof) appeared as a frequently recurring idea throughout the text and was therefore identified as a code (termed *growth*). The identification of codes was conducted with consideration of two factors: Contextual and semantic. Contextual indicators were defined as the context(s) in which words or phrases were used by students in their comments. Semantic indicators referred to the popular or colloquial meanings of words or phrases. The growth code was later connected with other codes such as *progress* and *development* which, considering contextual and semantic indicators, bore meaningful similarity with *growth*. These and other codes formed the concept of *personal growth*, relating to ideas about personal positive change and development. Later, *personal growth* was linked with two other concepts related contextually and semantically, which concerned personal expansion and potential realisation, to form the overarching category of *self-actualisation*. This process was later summarised in a codebook.

During and following full analysis, quality of the analysis was evaluated using four of the remaining six principles for quality discussed in section 3.7.3.2. Principle 3.7.3.2.3 (selection of appropriate unit of meaning and rigorous analysis) was adhered to by following the systematic coding process detailed in Figure 3.1 (p. 85). Principle 3.7.3.2.5 (dialogue among co-researchers) was adhered to through a detailed consultation with, and independent audit by, Dr Kate Hefferon. This process determined that the analysis procedure had been applied rigorously and that the codes, concepts and categories derived from the data were feasible in light of my interpretations (including fair representation of the data in the findings, principle 3.7.3.2.6). Principle 3.7.3.2.4 (prolonged engagement with the data) was ensured by conducting the initial and full analyses manually using hard-copy data and manual highlighting and notation. The independent audit with Dr Hefferon also included prolonged engagement, requiring several hours to discuss the coding process and analyses in detail and establish a degree of intersubjectivity with regard to the quality of the findings.

The remaining two principles for ensuring quality in qualitative content analysis were addressed later in the study. I will come to principle 3.7.3.2.8 (open and clear exposition of the analysis and context of the research) in the Results section and to principle 3.7.3.2.7 (recognition of changes in data and analysis over time) in the Discussion section of this chapter.



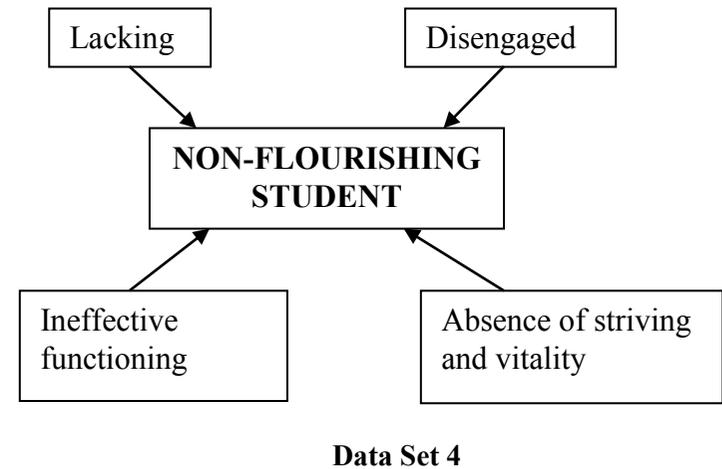
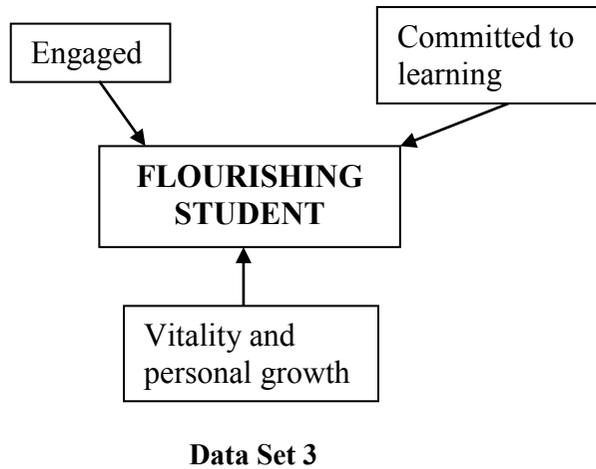
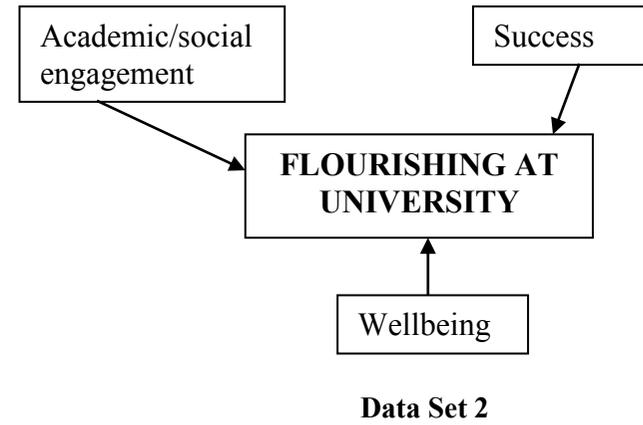
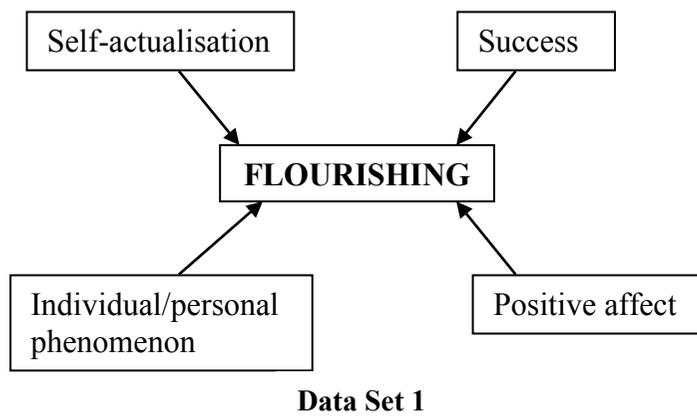
**Figure 3.1. Coding process for qualitative content analysis.**

### **3.8. Results**

Sample 1's understandings of flourishing (Data Set 1) generally centred on ideas of self-actualisation and success, with secondary categories focusing on the individual/personal nature of flourishing and on positive affect. Engagement with academic work and with the social learning environment was a significant category emerging from Data Set 2 (flourishing at university), although ideas of success and wellbeing were also prominent. In Data Set 3, the flourishing student was generally constructed as behaviourally and attitudinally engaged, committed to learning and as having vitality and an orientation towards personal growth. In Data Set 4, the non-flourishing student was portrayed as having a general sense of lacking, and as being disengaged, lazy, withdrawn, struggling, and unwilling to strive for progress. An overview of the main categories emerging from the data is presented in Figure 3.2 (p. 87).

Apart from the main categories, the analysis also yielded several notions of flourishing that could not be satisfactorily coded into existing concepts and categories due to their unique/divergent nature. Although these additional notions were not included in the main report of the findings, they were still considered important for the overall study and were therefore considered separately (section 3.8.5).

Findings are presented separately for each of the four data sets. In each case, I present an overview of the conceptual nature of the categories and constituent concepts, the prevalence of these (in terms of the percentage of the sample mentioning them), and a comprehensive codebook depicting the formation of the categories from codes and concepts. The codebooks also include textual examples from the data. Presentation of the analysis and findings was organised in this manner to ensure adherence to principle 3.7.2.8 (open and clear exposition of the analysis and context of research) for overall quality of the study.



**Figure 3.2. Overview of concepts and categories emerging from content analytic study.**

### **3.8.1. Data set 1: What does “flourishing” mean?**

#### **3.8.1.1. Self-actualisation**

The category of *self-actualisation* emerged from references to personal expansion, growth, and potential realisation (summarised in Table 3.1, pp. 90-91). These were mentioned by 80% of the sample (219 valid comments). Self-actualisation is a concept borrowed from Abraham Maslow’s (1943, 1954) hierarchy of needs, in which the satisfaction of certain “basic” needs (e.g. food, shelter, social relationships) leads to the potential to be “self-actualised,” or a complete, engaged human being. Although students’ comments in this category did not make explicit mention of basic need satisfaction in a Maslovian sense, they did allude to the same conceptual meaning as Maslow’s self-actualisation.

Thirteen per cent of comments referred to increases in size (keywords included *increase, expand, bigger*) in the context of *personal expansion* of skills, knowledge, or life view. Relating to this, 69% of comments mentioned some form of *personal growth* with a specific emphasis on growth in quality rather than size (e.g. *development, progress, better*). Finally, 23% of comments referred to *personal potential realisation*, encompassing ideas about striving to reach personal potential, thriving, and blossoming (e.g. *blooming, blossoming, prospering*).

#### **3.8.1.2. Success**

I identified 64% (219 valid comments) of comments making some reference to popular or conventional ideas about success, such as achieving goals or doing well in activities (see Table 3.1, pp. 90-91). This category emerged from three concepts relating to *ambition, doing well*, and *academic success*, which converged on their allusion to meanings of achievement or accomplishment of important goals, both academic and otherwise.

Thirty-eight per cent of comments referred to ideas about *ambition* (e.g. *challenge, goals, production, skill*) both in education and in general life. Twenty-three per cent made reference to *doing well*. This was distinguished from the first concept, *ambition*, by its focus on successful outcomes (doing an activity well, meeting expectations, being above average) rather than behaviours that lead to such outcomes (e.g. acquiring skills, overcoming adversity). *Academic success* was mentioned by 22% of the sample. This concept included references to academia (*education, course, grades*) and achieving academic success. The concept also included keywords such as

*knowledge, insight and understanding* which were used to characterise flourishing as intrinsic or personal learning.

### **3.8.1.3. Flourishing as a personal or individual phenomenon**

Thirty-five per cent of comments related to flourishing as a personal or individual phenomenon (219 valid comments; see Table 3.1, pp. 90-91). Given the theoretical distinctions between collective flourishing (as conceptualised in moral philosophical and Marxist perspectives; Leopold, 2007) and individual flourishing (individualist perspectives focusing on the flourishing of individuals as opposed to communities, e.g. Diener et al., 2010), I classified references to personal or individual flourishing as a separate category. This included references to the *individual* or *personal* success or development which highlighted flourishing as occurring within an individual rather than among individuals. The category also included pronouns (*you, yourself, one, someone*) which were used in contexts highlighting an individualistic nature of flourishing.

It is important to note, however, that comments in the Data Set 1 that were not included in this category did not necessarily characterise flourishing as a collective phenomenon (although see one of the variations described in section 3.8.5).

### **3.8.1.4. Positive affect**

The concept of positive affect emerged from a range of comments mentioning *happiness, satisfaction, enjoyment*, and other keywords denoting hedonic wellbeing (219 valid comments; Table 3.1, pp. 90-91). Twenty-three per cent of comments identified positive affect as either wholly or partially constituting flourishing. Keywords in this category related to *positive emotions (happy, content, satisfied)* as well as the personal *experience of emotions (sense, feel, affected)*. In addition to these, some keywords also related to *positive moods (lively, creative, enjoy)*, used in contexts that indicated short-term moods rather than longer-term emotional experiences such as life satisfaction.

The decision to label this category *positive affect* rather than, for example, “happiness” or “wellbeing,” was made on the basis of recurring references to a range of positive emotional experiences as opposed to happiness/wellbeing narrowly defined. Furthermore, the comments related to both long-term and short-term emotions/moods and to both the emotions themselves and the subjective experience of such emotions.

**Table 3.1. Codebook for Data Set 1.**

TEXT EXAMPLES	CODE EXAMPLES	CONCEPTS	CATEGORIES
<p>“To allow for an expansion of knowledge and experience.” (P. 243)</p> <p>“To grow into something bigger and better.” (P. 214)</p> <p>“Grow and develop in a healthy way.” (P. 192).</p> <p>“It is a term associated with growth and getting better...” (P. 157)</p> <p>“Growing, extending, to thrive.” (P. 76).</p> <p>“...something growing, flowering, blooming.” (P. 46)</p> <p>“Grow and develop...in every sense possible.” (P. 38)</p>	<p>expand, increase, greater, bigger, size</p>	<p>Personal expansion</p>	<p>Self-actualisation</p>
	<p>develop, progress, excel, better, improve</p>	<p>Personal growth</p>	
	<p>thriving, potential, realisation, blooming, blossoming</p>	<p>Personal potential realisation</p>	
<p>“To do well in something.” (P. 5)</p> <p>“...doing well...and achieving.” (P. 10)</p> <p>“...to achieve and meet goals.” (P. 39)</p> <p>“The most success that you could have.” (P. 62)</p> <p>“...in university flourishing would mean getting the optimum skills required under course of study.” (P. 82)</p> <p>“Means to ‘do well’, ‘succeed’...” (P. 92)</p> <p>“...complete all coursework and exams and pass with good grades.” (P. 143)</p>	<p>success, ambitious, achieve goals, skill, ability</p>	<p>Ambition</p>	<p>Success</p>
	<p>well/doing well, good/good at, best</p>	<p>Doing well</p>	
	<p>education, course, grades, understand, knowledge</p>	<p>Academic success</p>	
<p>“Gaining...what the individual wants/desire[s]...” (P. 4)</p> <p>“Expanding personal knowledge for personal growth.” (P. 7)</p> <p>“...the state that the individual is fulfilling their potential...growing as an individual.” (P. 16)</p> <p>“Growing in your knowledge of the world and your personality; knowing more about yourself...” (P. 25)</p> <p>“To better yourself through self development and to progress into a ‘new you’...” (P. 222)</p>	<p>person, personal, individual, your, yourself, one, oneself, someone</p>	<p><i>No distinct concepts</i></p>	<p>Flourishing as a personal or individual phenomenon</p>

"...being happy." (P. 8) "To pursue happiness." (P. 17) "...alive...generally happy and settles in what one is doing...be open to challenges." (P. 233) "To make the most of your fulfilment during times of happiness." (P. 88)	fulfilment, happy, satisfaction	Positive emotions	Positive affect
	feel, sense, experience	Emotional experiences	
	lively, joy/joyful	Positive moods	

Note: P=Participant number in the raw data.

## **3.8.2. Data set 2: What does it mean to flourish at university?**

### **3.8.2.1. Academic and social engagement**

The concept of academic and social engagement emerged from a range of comments relating to being successful and learning at university and being socially engaged with others in the university environment (see Table 3.2, p. 94). These were mentioned by the majority of the sample (92%; 217 valid comments). Overall, this category was formed on the basis of the notion of “holistic engagement” as a form of flourishing. Hence, many of the comments referred to multiple forms of engagement including both academic and social.

Academic engagement comments mainly made reference to succeeding academically, usually through extrinsic factors such as grade attainment. However, this was complemented by references to more intrinsic forms of engagement, particularly learning. Interestingly, the “social” strand of the category also complemented references to academic engagement, referring mainly to social relationships that relate to academic work rather than leisure time outside of university. Together, these notions came together to form a kind of multi-faceted engagement.

I identified three concepts within this category: *academic success*, *learning*, and *social engagement*. Academic success was mentioned by two thirds (67%) of students, including general success in one’s chosen course or subject of study, achieving good grades, and doing well in exams and other forms of assessments. Fifty-three per cent of comments mentioned learning as a form of flourishing. The *learning* concept drew on keywords that related to acquisition of knowledge and understanding that leads to positive personal development rather than extrinsic success such as good grades. A third concept in this category was social engagement (mentioned in 28% of comments). This included ideas relating to social involvement with others at university (*staff, friends, interact, converse*) and participation in social events (*activities, meeting*).

### **3.8.2.2. Success**

This category related to popular or conventional ideas about success such as goal achievement, summarised in Table 3.2 (p. 94). I was able to identify this category through its conceptual similarity to the *success* category emerging from Data Set 1, and many of the comments within the two categories included the same keywords.

Two thirds (66%) of comments referred to success (217 valid comments). The category also included two concepts previously identified – *ambition* and *doing well*. Thirty-six per cent of comments mentioned *ambition* (keywords included *challenge*,

*skill, goals, success*) often without any explicit reference to academia. Forty-two per cent of comments also made references to *doing well* (*well, good, best, top*) in the context of wellness or the process of doing well in life domains such as education.

### **3.8.2.3. Wellbeing**

I identified 56% of comments that made reference to wellbeing (217 valid comments). This category was composed of two concepts (Table 3.2, p. 94). A major concept, *personal growth* (mentioned in 44% of comments), was similar to the *self-actualisation* category identified in Data Set 1 (keywords included *grow, potential, progress*). Fifteen per cent of comments referred to a second concept, *enjoyment*. This concept emerged from a group of keywords relating to enjoyment of life, engagement or general enthusiasm (e.g. *happy, enjoy, interest, fulfilment*).

The decision to label this category *wellbeing* was made with consideration of the comments' references to both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of wellness. Due to this "two-pronged" nature of the comments, I reasoned that neither "happiness" nor "positive affect," which relate to hedonia, nor "self-actualisation," which relates to eudaimonia, would be sufficiently balanced to incorporate both aspects of students' understandings. Thus, wellbeing appeared to be the label most appropriately positioned to include the full breadth of keywords and ideas mentioned in the comments.

**Table 3.2. Codebook for Data Set 2.**

TEXT EXAMPLES	CODE EXAMPLES	CONCEPTS	CATEGORIES
<p>“...having a good social network of uni friends.” (P. 4)                      “Constantly bettering...grades...being engaged...with your course, interested in what you are doing – to the point that you feel uplifted/enlightened when you study.” (P. 8)                      “...to understand the topic you are studying.” (P. 11)                      “To get good grades and work hard, someone who asks questions and gets involved in different activities.” (P. 50)                      “...obtaining good grades at the university. Also means...personal interaction skills...” (P. 94)                      “Learn at a higher level.” (P. 137)</p>	<p>grades, exam, assignment, course, career</p>	<p>Academic success</p>	<p>Academic and social engagement</p>
	<p>education, learning, knowledge, experience, work</p>	<p>Academic learning</p>	
	<p>social, friends, interact, staff, activities</p>	<p>Social engagement</p>	
<p>“To be able to develop skill set required to function successfully...” (P. 23)                      “To do well...” (P. 30)                      “Do well and perform above the level you expect or are expected.” (P. 99)                      “It means to use the opportunity that you have...” (P. 120)                      “Successful or active.” (P. 131)                      “To be a successful student...” (P. 153)</p>	<p>skill, goal, success, challenge, opportunity</p>	<p>Ambition</p>	<p>Success</p>
	<p>well, best, top, good, expectations</p>	<p>Doing well</p>	
<p>“...to be happy and satisfied...” (P. 250)                      “...enjoying experience...” (P. 1)                      “To enjoy your studies.” (P. 2)                      “Ability to progress through your coursework...” (P. 148)                      “...to be progressing...” (P. 156)                      “Become better and better.” (P. 164)                      “To develop as a student and a researcher...” (P. 216)                      “To grow academically as well as personally” (P. 232)</p>	<p>grow, progress, potential, improve, better, excel</p>	<p>Personal growth</p>	<p>Wellbeing</p>
	<p>enjoy, happy, enthusiasm, feel, positive, interest, confidence</p>	<p>Enjoyment</p>	

Note: P=Participant number in the raw data.

### **3.8.3. Data set 3: Please list the characteristics of a student who is flourishing at university.**

#### **3.8.3.1. Academic and social engagement**

Eighty-two per cent (216 valid comments) of comments in this data set made some reference to the flourishing student as being academically and socially engaged with university life (see Table 3.3, p. 97). In an important sense, this category represented a personification of the *academic and social engagement* category that emerged in Data Set 2. One interesting aspect of the present category, however, was its more elaborate detail on some of the behaviours students associated with engagement. These behaviours included diligent class attendance, completing coursework and assignments punctually, and becoming involved in social activities run at the university, such as students' union functions and common interest groups.

I identified two concepts within this category. Seventy-three per cent of comments referred to *academic engagement*, including behaviours such as attending class and obtaining good grades, and intrinsic learning such as gaining knowledge. *Social engagement* was identified as a characteristic of a flourishing student by one third (34%) of students. This encompassed ideas such as maintaining positive relationships with staff and classmates, being friendly and outgoing, and respecting others (keywords included *relationship, sociable, communication, interacts*).

#### **3.8.3.2. Commitment to learning**

Sixty-one per cent of comments made reference to a series of desirable student characteristics regarding *commitment to learning* (216 valid comments; see Table 3.3, p. 97). These appeared as both intrinsic characteristics and overt behaviours. Having previously appeared as a distinct concept in Data Set 2 (as *academic learning*), the notion of learning emerged more saliently in the present data set and included more detail in the form of characteristics of flourishing learners. For example, students commenting within this category tended to use detailed, descriptive adjectives when referring to learning, characterising both the flourishing student's personal qualities and traits and the overt behaviours that represented the manifestation of such qualities and traits.

I identified two inter-related concepts within this category. *Diligence* was mentioned by 47% of students. This concept emerged from a group of keywords relating to "introverted" or "closed" ideas (e.g. *intelligent, determined, disciplined, hard worker*) which characterised flourishing students as serious, studious and generally

diligent in their academic work. The comments within this concept appeared to portray the flourishing student as the stereotypically serious, ambitious learner who works hard and studies beyond the minimum level required. Twenty-seven per cent of comments made reference to *openness to learning*, the second concept. This was conceived as a group of ideas relating to willingness and enthusiasm for learning (“willing to learn” was a recurring comment), interest, curiosity and inquisitiveness. Students commenting within this concept appeared to depict the flourishing student as more extraverted, creative, and expressive of a “zest” to learn new material for personal development rather than to satisfy extrinsic goals.

Although the two constituent concepts within this category portrayed somewhat different pictures of how a flourishing student might be characterised, many of the comments within the category included references to both concepts, suggesting that these are complementary rather than contradictory aspects of students’ conceptualisations of the flourishing student.

### **3.8.3.3. Vitality and personal growth**

Forty-eight per cent of comments referred to vitality and personal growth (216 valid comments; Table 3.3, p. 97). This category strongly resembled the ideas about self-actualisation and wellbeing that emerged in Data Sets 1 and 2. Within the category, however, a larger proportion (37%) of comments made reference to the concept of *vitality*, which included a range of ideas relating to self-motivation, confidence, optimism and engagement with academic studies and university life. Although the concept also included enjoyment, it was labelled *vitality* due to greater emphasis (reference frequency) on self-motivation and confidence than on positive affect (enjoyment, contentment, etc.). Eighteen per cent of comments referred to *personal growth* (*improve, develop, progress*) in contexts similar to the *self-actualisation* category in Data Set 1.

The two concepts within the *vitality and personal growth* category were conceptualised as sharing common ground in their orientation towards personal development. Their distinction appeared to be that the vitality concept referred to personal qualities and traits, whilst personal growth symbolised the aim or idealised outcomes of these. Hence, a student may exercise optimistic thinking or self-motivation which may lead to the realisation of self-improvement or progress.

**Table 3.3. Codebook for Data Set 3.**

TEXT EXAMPLES	CODE EXAMPLES	CONCEPTS	CATEGORIES
<p>“...gaining good/great marks, getting coursework in on time.” (P. 4)                      “Passing all examinations and coursework; participates in social activities.” (P. 14)                      “Attend the class regularly...enjoy the time in uni/the time attend the class; be part of the communities offered by university.” (P. 24)                      “Better grades; bigger network of social friends &amp; colleague; someone who is more vocal in lectures...” (P. 33)                      “Absorbed in coursework/study.” (P. 46)                      “Socially supported.” (P. 54)</p>	<p>study, grades, attend, class, lecture, good, exams</p>	<p>Success</p>	<p>Academic and social engagement</p>
	<p>sociable, students, relationships, participate, interact, friendly, respect, communication</p>	<p>Socialising</p>	
<p>“Hard working; determined; focus...” (P. 6)                      “Someone who takes her [sic] degree seriously.” (P. 28)                      “...work properly.” (P. 80)                      “...determined, clever.” (P. 89)                      “...openness, willing to learn/ask questions...” (P. 233)                      “...openness to experience...” (P. 232)                      “...curious, interested...not afraid to look stupid asking questions.” (P. 236)                      “...enthusiastic in their particular course.” (P. 173)</p>	<p>diligent, discipline, focus, work, realistic, serious</p>	<p>Diligence</p>	<p>Commitment to learning</p>
	<p>willing, open, curious, inquisitive, learning, creative, questioning</p>	<p>Openness</p>	
<p>“Happy, motivated, engaged.” (P. 1)                      “Happy to be there.” (P. 12)                      “Confidence, happy...” (P. 39)                      “...engages in curriculum activities.” (P. 88)                      “...student who always thinking to...study better.” (P. 152)                      “Personally satisfied and developing...” (P. 237)                      “...someone that does their best to grow and flourish...” (P. 28)</p>	<p>confident, motivated, engaged, happy, optimistic, progress, develop, grow, thriving, excel, potential, better</p>	<p><i>No distinct concepts</i></p>	<p>Vitality and personal growth</p>

Note: P=Participant number in the raw data.

### **3.8.4. Data set 4: Please list the characteristics of a student who is not flourishing at university.**

#### **3.8.4.1. Negation and lacking**

Fifty-seven per cent of students included keywords such as *no*, *not*, and *lacking* when commenting on the non-flourishing student (214 valid comments; see Table 3.4, p. 100). These were consistently used before keywords with positive connotations, suggesting that non-flourishing may be at least partially a lack of flourishing. Moreover, the comments in this category appeared to construct the ‘non-flourishing’ student as one who is simply *not* flourishing or who does not possess the characteristics of the ‘flourishing’ student.

I acknowledge that a potential question arising from the formation of this category may be why negating keywords were coded together as opposed to taking into account the other keywords they were negating. The formation of a negation category as a salient category in itself was felt to be important in this data set due to the frequent use of negating keywords and also the frequency with which more “substantial” negating words – such as *negative* and *lacking* – were used to emphasise students’ references to a sense of negation in the non-flourishing student. In other words, students’ comments in this category portrayed the non-flourishing student as inherently “missing” certain qualities, and this “missingness” appeared salient in its own right rather than as just a qualification of such qualities.

#### **3.8.4.2. Disengagement from academic work and learning**

“Disengagement” was not a keyword used in any of the comments. I selected this as a label because virtually all comments in the category stated, or implied, that students’ failure to engage with academic commitments came about from an intrinsic lack of interest, effort or willingness rather than from external factors, as seen in Table 3.4 (p. 100). In this category, students depicted the non-flourishing student as failing to engage in all or most of the behaviours emerging in Data Set 3 that characterised the flourishing student.

Fifty-three per cent of comments characterised a non-flourishing student as being behaviourally disengaged from traditional academic commitments such as attending lectures and completing examinations and coursework (214 valid comments). The sample expressed this disengagement as skipping lectures, failing to meet deadlines, obtaining poor grades, or generally failing to be involved with academic work and learning.

#### **3.8.4.3. Ineffective functioning**

Fifty-two per cent of comments mentioned ineffective functioning (214 valid comments; Table 3.4, p. 100). This category encompassed a range of keywords (predominantly adjectives) characterising non-flourishing as being lazy in relation to doing academic work, struggling to understand subjects, and general negative affect (e.g. *unhappy, depressed, sad*) in relation to being socially withdrawn or reclusive. In particular, *lazy (laziness)* was the most frequently mentioned keyword, cited by one quarter (25%) of the sample. This category portrayed the non-flourishing student as possessing a range of undesirable personal qualities, both as a student (*lazy, disorganised, procrastinate, bored*) and in socio-emotional terms (*shy, hopeless, isolated, discouraged*).

The *ineffective functioning* category was conceptualised as being distinct from the *disengagement* category described in section 3.8.4.2 on the basis of its focus upon intrinsic traits and experiences as opposed to overtly observable behaviours. The decision to distinguish the two as separate categories rather than different concepts within the same category was based on the specific salience (reference frequency) of some of the keywords in the present category, such as *lazy*. This salience suggested that internal struggles and emotional experiences were conceptualised by students as an important dimension of non-flourishing in themselves independent of the behavioural tendencies that may accompany them.

A further point of interest within this category was its representation of negative indicators of non-flourishing as opposed to the lack of positive indicators. In other words, non-flourishing was represented here as a negative phenomenon in its own right rather than the mere absence of the indicators of flourishing (though see 3.8.4.4 below).

#### **3.8.4.4. Absence of striving and vitality**

Forty-two per cent of comments explained non-flourishing in terms of what it is not (214 valid comments). This category brought together most keywords appearing in categories from the first three data sets, particularly *self-actualisation* and *success* categories (e.g. *goal, interest, willing, confident, achieve, progress, etc.*), summarised in Table 3.4 (p. 100). Here, the non-flourishing student was characterised as either lacking personal goals or failing to achieve them, being uninterested or unwilling in relation to academic learning, and lacking motivation to learn, improve, or progress. Keywords in this category almost always appeared with Negation and Lacking keywords (*no, not, lack*) to denote a general absence of flourishing behaviours and characteristics.

**Table 3.4. Codebook for Data Set 4.**

TEXT EXAMPLES	CODE EXAMPLES	CONCEPTS	CATEGORIES
<p>“Not very disciplined.” (P. 5)                      “Not motivated, not willing...” (P. 6)                      “Lack of confidence...” (P. 34)                      “...don’t care about study.” (P. 83)                      “...non participation at classes.” (P. 153)</p>	<p>no, not, negative, lack</p>	<p><i>No distinct concepts</i></p>	<p>Negation and lacking</p>
<p>“Does not attend class and pass examinations and assignments...” (P. 14)                      “Someone struggling to meet deadlines...” (P. 18)                      “A student that struggles to understand elements of the courses and fails to do sufficient background study...” (P. 35)                      “Gets bad grades or sometimes average scores or below average...” (P. 92)</p>	<p>late, not on time, absent,                      poor, grades, study, deadline,                      attend</p>	<p><i>No distinct concepts</i></p>	<p>Disengagement from academic work and learning</p>
<p>“Pessimistic...helpless...” (P. 19)                      “Sad, discontentment...” (P. 29)                      “Grumpy, isolated.” (P. 102)                      “Laziness, procrastination...” (P. 132)                      “Disorganised, miserable, sad, lackadaisical.” (P. 156)                      “A recluse...” (P. 156)                      “Lazy, disorganised...” (P. 249)</p>	<p>lazy, lost, struggle,                      depressed, withdrawn, stress,                      disorganised, confused,                      mess, shy, hopeless,                      pessimist, sad, recluse</p>	<p><i>No distinct concepts</i></p>	<p>Ineffective functioning</p>
<p>“...someone who does worse than their expectations/potential...someone who does not...achieve their goals.” (P. 45)                      “A student who doesn’t care.” (P. 47)                      “No interest, no noticeable improvement.” (P. 44)                      “...does not want to learn...” (P. 127)                      “...not friendly and happy, not interested...” (P. 130)                      “...those [who] don’t have a goal...” (P. 240)</p>	<p>goal, aim, knowledge,                      motivated, interest, effort,                      success, confident, achieve,                      progress, improve, potential</p>	<p><i>No distinct concepts</i></p>	<p>Absence of striving and vitality</p>

Note: P=Participant number in the raw data.

### **3.8.5. Contradictions and variations**

The data sets in this study included three minorities of comments that could not be coded into the emergent categories, yet I reasoned these were still important in contributing to the answering of the research questions. Therefore, in this section I will present a consideration of these “contradictions and variations.”

The first minority of comments concerned the idea of extraversion and introversion in flourishing. Comments mentioning the social aspects of flourishing overwhelmingly alluded to extraversion (making friends, participating in activities, asking questions) and social engagement as constituting the flourishing student. However, two comments in Data Set 3 identified flourishing students as inherently introverted. For example, one participant wrote that the flourishing student may be characterised as “...nerdy, unsociable perhaps...loners, people who prefer books to people” (Participant 2, Data Set 3). This is in contradiction to much of the current positive psychology literature on flourishing, which tends to support a characterisation of flourishing emphasising social participation and engagement (e.g. Keyes, 1998, 2002; Seligman, 2011).

In this case, the relationship of flourishing with introversion may have some relation to balancing academic work with social life, wherein flourishing to a high degree in academia may be at the detriment of social life. However, as I noted in my critique of Oades et al.’s (2011) paper on the positive university, some behaviours or characteristics that may appear to be antithetical to a stereotypical conception of flourishing may in fact be interpretable as unique forms of flourishing that are valid and relevant in a particular context. In this sense, a “nerdy” student who “prefers books to people” may be contradicting what much of positive psychological theory would characterise as flourishing, yet still be flourishing in a manner relevant to the context in which he or she is operating.

A second minority of comments (nine comments in Data Sets 1 and 2) mentioned collective flourishing as opposed to individual flourishing. These made reference to larger groups such as the student body, communities, or society when defining flourishing. Participants defining flourishing in collective terms also tended to define flourishing at university in collective terms. One participant wrote:

The word flourishing means a steady boom in a society or community. It also means a steady consistent rise of slope in a graphical manner. Flourishing therefore is a steady consistent rise of a particular thing or development in society (Participant 49, Data Set 2).

The same participant continued, “To flourish [at] university...is a steady consisten[cy] of student attendance in the university community with the aim of achieving positive result...in the university community or society.” Comments referring to collective flourishing align with Aristotelian and Marxist perspectives, which posited that flourishing can occur only in societies in which citizens act in accordance with their true (virtuous) nature and not in individuals alone (Leopold, 2007). Thus, although the majority of students’ comments either made no specific reference to the individual or collective nature of flourishing or characterised it as specifically an individual phenomenon, collectivistic conceptualisations remain possible and valid as a variation in the conceptualisation of flourishing.

A final issue concerned whether flourishing is determined intrinsically or extrinsically. The majority of the data referred to intrinsic determination, or the idea that flourishing is determined by personal determination, deliberation, or effort. However, five comments in Data Sets 1 and 2 stated that flourishing is enabled by extrinsic factors, such as social support or other favourable conditions (e.g. “To excel and do well in something due to favourable conditions” [Participant 179, Data Set 1]).

Extant positive psychological theories of flourishing do acknowledge some aspects of flourishing, such as social relationships, are made possible by external factors (in this case, the existence and engagement of other people). However, parallel to the main argument of this thesis, they place less emphasis on wider contextual factors that may enable flourishing.

In his seminal work *Nature’s Gambit*, Feldman (Feldman with Goldsmith, 1986) argues that the emergence of prodigious talent in children is not due only to the genetic and other personal characteristics of the individual, but also to the wider contexts in which the individual’s life is situated. He identifies three such contexts. These are the history and development of the field in which the individual shows prodigious talent, the social and cultural environment and its disposition towards the field of specialisation, and evolutionary history. Although Feldman’s example of prodigious talent may be considered somewhat different from the flourishing I consider in this thesis, it is congruent with the possibility of conceptualising flourishing as a state or phenomenon brought about by factors other than intrinsic determination alone. Furthermore, these other factors may sometimes be outside of the immediate control of the individual.

### **3.9. Discussion**

Building on the relative lack of contextual detail in existing positive psychological theories of flourishing, this study aimed to explore the construct of flourishing within the context of UK higher education. Specifically, points of interest included the manner in which flourishing is defined by students in higher education settings and the way(s) it manifests in students. This exploration was anticipated to complement existing positive psychological theories of flourishing, which conceptualise the construct at a global level, by contextualising the construct in the academic, social, and other environments in which students operate in universities.

The study was anticipated to give clearer direction as to the focus points of positive education programmes and other interventions that could be developed for higher education in the future, for example in terms of clarifying the nature of the flourishing they seek to cultivate in students. In this section, I will discuss possible interpretations and implications of the findings, strengths and limitations of the study, what the findings contribute to knowledge on flourishing, and how the study can be situated in this thesis.

#### **3.9.1. Discussion of findings**

Major ideas about flourishing as constructed by students in Data Set 1 largely overlapped with conceptualisations of flourishing proposed by existing positive psychological theories. However, in Data Sets 2 through 4, themes emerging from the text were enriched with contextual details that theories employing abstractionist assumptions are unable to provide. In these data sets, contextual details specific to higher education settings emerged in the form of both the contextualisation of otherwise abstract aspects of flourishing contained in existing theories, and the emergence of novel/unique aspects of flourishing not already contained in existing theories.

##### **3.9.1.1. Data set 1: Flourishing**

In Data Set 1, the four categories emerging from the text included *self-actualisation*, *success*, *flourishing as a personal or individual phenomenon*, and *positive affect*. All of these notions feature readily in prevailing flourishing theories in positive psychology.

The emergence of *self-actualisation* as a prominent category in the data set suggests that students conceptualise flourishing on its own largely as the realisation of personal potential, or “being the best one can be.” This idea supports Maslow’s (1943) conception of the self-actualised individual as being fully satisfied with regards to basic needs and therefore more readily engaged with “higher order” needs such as intellectual

pursuits, aesthetic beauty, and peak experiences. As noted in the Results section, although students did not specifically mention the concept of human needs in the Maslovian sense, their ideations of *self-actualisation* were conceptually reminiscent of Maslow's, and therefore it may be argued that these ideations do not differ a great deal from what is already in the literature.

The notion of *success* is akin to the “achievement” or “accomplishment” element of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing in Well-Being Theory, to the “environmental mastery” aspect of Ryff's (1989) Psychological Well-Being and Keyes' (2002) flourishing mental health, and to the “competence” component in Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory. These ideas converge in their focus upon successful accomplishment of goals. For instance, within his PERMA model, Seligman (2011) argues that accomplishment is one of the five ends individuals pursue for their own sake rather than as a means to other ends, making it constituent of flourishing as something that is perceived as a good in and of itself.

As with success, positive affect also features as a prominent characteristic of flourishing theories in positive psychology. Positive affect is one of the three core components of subjective wellbeing<sup>34</sup> within Keyes' (2002) mental health model and is also another element of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model which is pursued as a good itself. Huppert and So (2009) include reference to positive affect (“feeling good,” p. 1) in their operationalisation of the concept of flourishing as measured by the European Social Survey whilst Schreiner et al. (2012) refer to positive affect as “emotional vitality.”

Finally, virtually all prevailing perspectives on flourishing within positive psychology have implicit in them an orientation towards individual rather than collective flourishing.<sup>35</sup> Departing from the notion of flourishing as something individuals cannot achieve independently of social or cultural groups, as advocated by Aristotle (350BC/2000) and Marx (1959/1988), positive psychology now focuses primarily on the flourishing of the individual. In Keyes' (2002) mental health framework, for example, emphasis is placed on individual mental health and positive functioning. Within the framework, even the concept of social wellbeing (Keyes, 1998)

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<sup>34</sup> Subjective wellbeing is conceptualised as being comprised of three components; two affective and one cognitive. The two affective components are positive affect and the absence of negative affect, while the cognitive component is life satisfaction (see Diener, 1984).

<sup>35</sup> Noteworthy exceptions to this include the Hive Hypothesis (Haidt, Seder & Kesebir, 2008) and thriving (Benson & Scales, 2009). I discussed thriving earlier in the present chapter. The Hive Hypothesis refers to a form of collective flourishing achieved when individuals congregate in large groups, engaging in mutual higher-order pursuits that transcend the self (e.g. musical concerts, political rallies, team sports).

is ideated as the wellbeing of individuals in relation to the way they perceive and relate to their social environment, rather than as any form of wellbeing shared by individuals in collective settings. Perspectives such as those of Ryff (1989; the psychological wellbeing of the individual), Seligman (2002, 2011; authentic happiness or flourishing within individuals), and Diener (1984; the subjective wellbeing of individuals or nations, but not of collectives) share similar individualistic understandings of flourishing and place less emphasis on the flourishing of groups or collectives. Thus, the present sample's understandings of flourishing as a primarily individual phenomenon concur with prevalent perspectives in positive psychology and support these perspectives.

Overall, the understandings students produced in Data Set 1 positioned flourishing by itself as an individual phenomenon characterised by processes of self-actualisation, success/achievement, and the experience of positive affect. The convergence of the themes emerging from the data set with many of the prominent features of flourishing in major positive psychological theories suggests that on the whole, university students' understandings of flourishing do not appear to differ from conventional theoretical understandings in any significant manner.

Analysis of students' texts in Data Set 1 provided the opportunity to tentatively confirm or refute the possibility that students may understand flourishing differently from positive psychology theories. However, its primary purpose was to act as a comparison to the analysis of Data Sets 2 through 4 which focused on flourishing in higher education. If unique elements of flourishing emerged in the latter data sets, support could be argued for the position that flourishing in higher education differs from "generic" flourishing. I will turn to this matter in the next section.

### **3.9.1.2. Data sets 2-4: Flourishing in higher education**

Themes emerging from Data Sets 2 through 4 provided unique insight into the ways students understand flourishing in higher education. Interestingly, students' understandings of the concept of flourishing at university appeared to be qualitatively different from their understandings of generic flourishing. This qualitative difference emerged in two ways: the addition of contextual detail to some of the generic aspects of flourishing that appear in prevailing theories and the emergence of some aspects of flourishing unique to higher education that do not appear in prevailing theories. I will begin by exemplifying the former type of difference, the addition of contextual detail.

Some themes in Data Sets 2 through 4 did not differ from what extant theories propose as such, but instead served to contextualise them in a way relevant to higher

education. A good example of this is the *academic and social engagement* category that emerged in Data Set 2. Engagement is a concept widely accepted within positive psychology theory to be conducive to or constituent of flourishing (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, Seligman, 2011). In these theories, engagement is conceptualised as close absorption in and enjoyment of activities of interest. This in turn may contribute to other aspects of flourishing such as cultivating meaning or purpose in life or fostering social relationships. However, as I discussed in Chapter One, as these theories adopt abstractionist underpinnings, they cannot, and perhaps do not aim to, explain the uniquely detailed nuances of engagement in specific contexts. For example, Csikszentmihalyi's "flow theory" was derived from in-depth interviews with people who engaged in activities producing states of flow in the 1970s, however, the emergent theory was later abstracted, or developed empirically (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

In Data Set 2, students added context-specific details to the theme of engagement. They wrote about, for example, the behavioural aspects of engagement, such as involving oneself in academic coursework, studying for exams, and attending classes. In the area of social engagement, they wrote extensively about interaction with classmates and academic staff, in the sense of maintaining and developing professional relationships and development, rather than leisure. Here, although the contextualisation of engagement in this manner may seem intuitive, my point is that the specific contextual details were derived using a social constructionist approach, i.e. systematically and on the basis of socially-derived evidence, rather than the top-down contextualisation employed when abstractionist theories are applied to practice.

Perhaps more important than the contextualisation of aspects of generic flourishing are the themes emerging from the data that were unique to flourishing in higher education and not already existent in prevailing positive psychological theories. I will argue there are at least two prominent themes in the latter three data sets that draw attention as being unique to students' conceptualisations of flourishing in higher education. These are learning and progress. I will first discuss learning.

Learning emerged as a concept within the category of *academic and social engagement* in Data Set 2 and as a category itself, *commitment to learning*, in Data Set 3. In many cases, learning was expressed explicitly in students' comments rather than being inferred or interpreted during the analysis process. As noted in the Results section, phrases such as *willing to learn* were frequently repeated by different students, while others mentioned learning-related codes such as *knowledge*, *understanding*, and

*asking questions*. If one examines theorists in disciplines such as education, philosophy, cultural studies, and social sciences, there appear to be numerous arguments supporting learning as a positive process that enables many of the conditions necessary for human flourishing. For instance, Jensen (2000) notes that the learning of “capabilities, skills, and insights” (p. 40) in both formal and informal educational settings is essential for human flourishing. His argument bridges learning with flourishing with the notion of cultural heritage. According to Jensen, flourishing may be conceptualised as an educational ideal focused upon the cultivation of free, critical “citizens of the world” (pp. 39-40; see also Nussbaum, 1997). Learning to think freely and critically about the human condition requires consideration of learning and education in broad and diverse contexts, such as culture, that go beyond narrow contexts such as the formal education system (e.g. Lave, 1988). This is, learning is a process that occurs across and throughout life (within culture), not just at school during the years of formal education. When one learns, broadly defined, within one’s own and other cultural contexts, one encounters new ideas and alternative viewpoints (the “acculturation” process Seneca defends in the framework of liberal education), and is therefore drawn to think freely and critically. In a sense, through learning, one becomes better equipped to judge the goods in life and the most meaningful ways of pursuing them. This is a position endorsed by numerous other theorists, though the labelling of concepts sometimes differs (e.g. Noddings, 2003).

Empirical evidence has also supported the link between learning and flourishing. I noted at the end of Chapter Two, for example, that Fredrickson’s (2001, 2004, 2009) broaden-and-build theory has accumulated considerable empirical evidence that experiences of positive emotions lead to a greater propensity for curiosity and exploration, which in turn leads to learning. Also, Hammond and Feinstein’s (2006) research on the predictive power of learning and engagement at school over later physical and mental flourishing in adulthood showed that students who were more effective and engaged learners were considerably more likely to enjoy flourishing holistic health in later life. More recently, Aked and Thompson (2011) have argued that learning is a strategy to maintain mental activeness and foster curiosity, which empirical research has shown contributes to greater wellbeing in everyday life.

Overall, learning may be considered to be closely, synergistically connected with flourishing on both philosophical and empirical levels. Its emergence as a unique theme in the latter three data sets in the present study is therefore of interest. Before

explaining the implications of this, however, I will turn to the second unique theme in the data – progress.

A second unique theme emerging from the latter three data sets on flourishing in higher education is the notion of personal growth, or progress. I acknowledge that *personal growth* also appeared in Data Set 1 in which students defined flourishing *per se*. However, my point here is not to differentiate unique aspects of flourishing at university in Data Sets 2 through 4 from the themes in Data Set 1, but instead from themes in prevailing positive psychological theories.

Progress did not appear in the latter three data sets as a concept or category. However, it, and codes alluding to it such as *developing*, *excelling*, and *improving* featured prominently in the *personal growth* concept in Data Set 2, in the *vitality and personal growth* category in Data Set 3, and in the *absence of striving and vitality* category in Data Set 4. Students frequently mentioned progress and related ideas as meaning personal improvement or development in a positive sense, or a form of change in which a person is in a continuous transition from a lesser enlightened state to a greater one. Progress as a concept related to flourishing does not appear to have received much attention within positive psychology. One of the few theorists who have considered it is Vittersø (e.g. 2009). Vittersø comments that too much attention has been given to theorising what flourishing is (its structure) and not enough to what it does (its function). He proposes a functional model of flourishing composed of two components: striving and accomplishment. According to this model, flourishing is not a static state but a dynamic process emerging from the constant alternation of individuals between the two components. Here, although individuals flourish when they accomplish tasks of interest or importance (as advocated in Seligman's [2011] PERMA model), they also flourish when they are in the process of *pursuing* accomplishment – or striving. As striving in Vittersø's (2009) model refers to the notion of desiring/pursuing positive change, it bears some resemblance to the present sample's ideation of progress. The distinction appears to be that striving refers to the process of pursuing positive change whilst progress refers to the change itself.

### **3.9.2. Implications of the findings**

I will now turn to the implications of the emergence of the unique themes of learning and progress for positive psychological theories of flourishing. I will first consider implications for theory, followed by implications for practice.

#### **3.9.2.1. Implications for theory**

As I noted when discussing the two themes above, there is currently little acknowledgement of either learning or progress in existing theories of flourishing. Apart from broaden-and-build theory (which, strictly speaking, is a theory of positive emotions rather than flourishing), major theories of flourishing such as Well-Being Theory (Seligman, 2011), psychosocial prosperity (Diener & Diener, 2011), or the mental health continuum (Keyes, 2002) make no explicit reference to learning as an important aspect or requirement of flourishing. Also, apart from Vittersø's (2009) recognition of striving as an aspect of flourishing conceptually associated with progress, they do not explicitly recognise progress as an aspect or requirement of flourishing.

The omission of themes such as learning and progress does not necessarily constitute a flaw in prevailing positive psychological theories of flourishing. It should be recalled that these theories' primary aim is to offer a widely-encompassing theoretical framework within which particular, theoretically derived conceptualisations of flourishing may be investigated empirically. As I mentioned in the Introduction section of this chapter, although some of the theories recognise they may be expressed in different modes across contexts (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2001), they cannot account for the specific expression in a given context, particularly without appealing to some deductive or top-down method of application. This seems to be particularly significant when inductive explorations of flourishing in a given context "throw up" unique themes (such as learning or progress in higher education) that are unaccounted for by prevailing abstractionist theories. Ultimately, the emergence of factors such as learning and progress as important aspects of university students' understandings of flourishing in higher education suggests that flourishing in higher education does appear to be qualitatively different from "generic" flourishing. This qualitative difference is constituted by some common ground between general and context-specific understandings of flourishing, and also, importantly, some entirely unique themes or conceptualisations.

### **3.9.2.2. Implications for practice**

A final point to consider regarding this study's findings concerns implications for practice. Specifically, it is important to note the potential implications of the understanding of flourishing in higher education emerging from this study for the applied domain of positive education.

I considered some of the different conceptualisations of wellbeing in education in the Introduction section of this chapter. For example, I noted that wellbeing in schools has been variously positioned as multi-faceted wellness (e.g. Masters, 2004),

holistic skill development (e.g. Clement, 2010), and as thriving (e.g. Benson & Scales, 2009). However, apart from theoretical conceptualisations, particular conceptions of wellbeing in education are also currently being applied to students in practical educational settings, and this constitutes an important domain in which the present findings raise questions. When discussing the proposals suggested by Oades et al. (2011), concerning the expansion of whole institution positive education in universities, in Chapter Two, I argued that the authors' adoption of a top-down method of applying positive psychology to higher education barred consideration of the possibility that flourishing may mean something different in universities from what global-level theories in positive psychology dictate. In other words, Oades et al. (2011) applied positive psychology theory to their recommendations on the basis of the assumption that a generic theoretical understanding of flourishing – in this case, Seligman's (2011) PERMA model – is an ideal (or the most pertinent) form of flourishing to cultivate in students at university. The present findings, particularly the apparent qualitative uniquenesses of flourishing at university, therefore have important implications for practice-oriented work in positive education as such work (e.g. Oades et al., 2011) is currently oriented towards cultivating a generic form of flourishing in university students rather than one that is, by students' own understandings, contextually derived from, and relevant to, higher education. Thus, to re-orient current positive education theory and practice towards a more context-specific understanding of flourishing that is relevant to educational settings seems to be a pertinent point that merits further consideration by positive education theorists and practitioners.

### **3.9.3. Evaluating the quality of this study**

The findings and implications of this study must be considered within the boundaries posed by its limitations. I will acknowledge these below.

#### **3.9.3.1. Limitations posed by the sample**

The use of a sample composed of students enrolled only in post-1992 (former polytechnic) universities creates some difficulty in applying the present findings to the wider higher education sector. For example, differences in academic culture and greater emphases on either teaching or research in pre-1992 institutions ("traditional" universities) may influence the conceptualisation of flourishing by students within such institutions (e.g. Russell Group, 1994 Group, University Alliance, and million+ institutions). Greater student success in terms of research output and publication at research-oriented institutions (Cooper & Turpin, 2007) may be implicated in different conceptualisations of what constitutes flourishing at university and flourishing students.

Flourishing may also be conceptualised differently among undergraduate students compared with postgraduate students, and among postgraduate taught students compared with postgraduate research students, given the different emphases that are placed on learning set curricula and creating original knowledge. The conceptualisation of flourishing among academic staff may also carry differences from that among the student body, for example in terms of engagement or participation (Fritschner, 2000). Thus, although the current sample was adequately diverse for the purposes of this study, it should be acknowledged that students drawn from other types of universities may have offered different conceptualisations of flourishing as a function of their academic cultures.

### **3.9.3.2. Limitations posed by the questionnaire**

Although careful effort was made to pose questions as neutrally as possible, the final questions included in the questionnaire may have led some students to offer particular conceptualisations of flourishing as opposed to others. For example, the third and fourth items in the questionnaire (see Appendix D) asked students about the “characteristics” of flourishing and non-flourishing students. Reference to characteristics may imply a narrow connotation of the term, such as personal or intrinsic characteristics, as opposed to a broader connotation that includes a student’s relationships with his or her environment, or the wider circumstances or contexts. This may have been associated with some students being led to record more individualistic or intrinsic characteristics when writing about their understandings of flourishing and non-flourishing students than they might have if the questionnaire items had been worded differently.

### **3.9.3.3. Content analysis as a form of abstraction**

A key criticism that could be brought against this study is the apparent contradiction between its argument against abstractionism and its use of content analysis, which is essentially a form of data reduction. If I argue that prevailing positive psychology theories are problematic because they separate, or abstract, ideas from the complex contexts in which they occur in order to reduce them to simpler, context-free theoretical components, then it seems illogical to counter this with a data analysis technique which aims to form what might be called abstracted concepts and categories from textually (and contextually) richer data. Indeed, Graneheim and Lundman (2004) do refer to the concept and category formation process in content analysis as “abstraction” (p. 106). Whilst I acknowledge this criticism would be valid to an extent, it should be noted that, even within qualitative-constructionist methodologies, virtually all data analysis methods are reductionist (or abstractionist) to varying degrees. For example, although

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis seeks to develop a detailed, in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences, it still presents this understanding in the form of numerous themes drawn (abstracted) from the data.

My defence of using content analysis in this study is based upon two factors. Firstly, since virtually all methodologies considered for the study are reductionist in some sense, the "problem" could not reasonably be avoided. Secondly and more importantly, I would argue that the problem of contextlessness that follows the adoption of abstractionism is considerably less apparent in the present findings than it is in prevailing positive psychology theories. Specifically, I would argue that a sound degree of contextual detail, relevant to the nuances of higher education, was retained and reflected in the findings and was not "sanitised" to create context-free or abstract understandings of flourishing.

#### **3.9.3.4. "Spontaneous construction" of flourishing in higher education**

A final issue for consideration within the limitations of this study concerns the "spontaneous construction" of flourishing in higher education as a unique concept. I mentioned in Chapter One that Burr (2003) argues concepts are not universally existent in an objective reality but rather constructed by individuals in interaction within numerous possible subjective realities. In reflecting on students' approach to the task of writing about flourishing, I noticed during data collection that some students appeared to construct their understandings spontaneously, or "on the spot." For example, some students required extra time to consider their response before or after writing, and some commented to me on the unique nature of this concept, explaining that it was not one to which they had previously given much thought. This constitutes both a strength and a limitation for the study. It is a limitation in that some students could have provided richer data had they had more time to consider their response in depth. However, it is also a strength in that students wrote about the first ideas to come to mind, and in this sense their data may be considered more valid in that it represents the ideas most salient to them.

It is worth noting that my reflection on the spontaneous construction of flourishing by students may have led to changes or development in my perception of the nature of the data over time, an issue concerned with principle 3.7.3.2.7 (changes in data and analysis over time) for ensuring quality that I mentioned I would return to. However, during the four-week period during which data was collected, no other significant social events occurred which may have influenced students' data, and upon reflection during data analysis and within the auditing dialogue carried out with Dr Kate

Hefferon I do not reason that my thoughts on spontaneous construction led to significantly biased change in my coding.

#### **3.9.4. Situating this study within the thesis**

The theory and research reported in this chapter was aimed at addressing the first problematic aspect of abstractionist ontological perspectives adopted by positive psychology theories – contextless definition. The present study offered contributions to existing knowledge on the nature of flourishing by exploring the meaning of flourishing within higher education and as it is defined and understood by university students. Establishment of an initial basis for the nature of flourishing in higher education settings paved the way to explore the second problematic aspect of contextlessness – contextless measurement. I will turn to this in Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# MEASURING FLOURISHING: DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF THE SCALE OF FLOURISHING IN ACADEMIA (SOFIA)<sup>36</sup>

### 4.1. Abstract

In this chapter, I will address the second aspect of contextlessness in flourishing that I outlined in Chapter One: contextless measurement. First, I will offer some discussion of philosophical considerations in psychometric measurement, including whether flourishing can and should be measured. Specifically, I will argue that it is possible to measure flourishing psychometrically and that such measurement can be useful within positive education as long as it is conducted with certain epistemological caveats. Following this, I will review existing psychometric measures of flourishing. These are divided into two groups: general measures of flourishing and measures developed specifically for educational settings. Next, I will report a series of studies aimed at developing and validating the Scale of Flourishing in Academia (SOFIA), a psychometric tool for assessing context-specific flourishing in higher education settings. Findings of these studies suggest the SOFIA is initially valid and reliable, though would benefit from further psychometric evaluation, including exploration/adaptation in cultural settings other than the UK. Findings and their implications for the thesis and positive education more generally will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

### 4.2. Philosophical considerations

Before reviewing the psychometric measurement of flourishing in more detail, it is necessary to examine a number of philosophical considerations regarding this issue. In this section, I will consider three questions that pertain to the assumptions upon which the work in this chapter is based. These are: Can flourishing be measured? Should flourishing be measured? If flourishing is measured psychometrically, how is it measured? Exploring these questions will allow me to situate the development of the SOFIA within this thesis and in the wider context of ongoing philosophical debates in measurement issues.

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<sup>36</sup> A paper based on this chapter is currently under revision as follows:  
Gokcen, N., Hefferon, K., Dancey, C.P., & Attree, E.A. (under revision). Measuring 'flourishing' in higher education students: Development and psychometric evaluation of the Scale of Flourishing in Academia (SOFIA).

### 4.2.1. Can flourishing be measured?

The question of whether flourishing can be measured may seem absurd given that it, and similarly intangible concepts, have been measured empirically in the social sciences for decades (e.g. Groth-Marnat, 2009). If psychometric scales that measure flourishing already exist (e.g. Diener et al., 2010), surely this confirms the “measurability” of the concept. However, this is not necessarily the case. To the contrary, the intangible nature of flourishing necessitates thoughtful consideration of whether psychometric scales can, indeed, measure flourishing meaningfully and completely. In considering this question, I will draw on Suissa’s (2008) critique of positive psychology/education within which she criticises aspects of positive psychology’s (exclusive) use of empirical measurement methods for assessing happiness. Although this critique is aimed at happiness as conceptualised in Seligman’s (2002) authentic happiness theory and therefore precedes positive psychology’s new focus on flourishing (Seligman, 2011), it remains relevant to the empirical measurement of flourishing as the psychometric methods employed to create the measures are the same.

Suissa (2008) argues that the problematic nature of empirical measurement of happiness is more complex than simple reductionism or a failure to understand what it is that is being measured. Rather, she takes issue with the tendency of positive psychology to reify, through discourse, what are essentially immeasurable things. For example, Suissa contends that although positive psychologists show awareness that empirical measures assess *manifestations* of intangible concepts, defined in particular ways, rather than the concepts themselves (e.g. Peterson, 2006), they appear to discuss and use such measures as if the concepts were being measured in some complete and meaningful way. This problem may arise from the necessity in psychometric measurement for abstract theories or concepts to be modelled (reduced to simpler components) before measures can be created to assess them. As Moneta (2012) notes:

When researchers use a measurement method in order to test...a theory, they typically simplify the theory and condense it into a simpler and more precise model. The model can be an authentic mathematical model...or simply a graphic representation, such as a conceptual diagram, a path diagram, or a flow chart. Modeling is helpful because it reduces the gap between words and numbers and hence allows testing abstract relationships expressed in natural language on real-world data using statistics. Yet, because it implies a somewhat arbitrary interpretation and simplification of the underlying theory, researchers may end up adopting different models in their research and hence disagreeing on how certain constructs should be measured (p. 24).

Discrepancies between different measurement tools seem to be only one of several problematic aspects of the psychometric process. If intangible concepts such as happiness or flourishing require structural simplification before they can be measured, then it might be reasoned that the focus on the new, simplified components of the intangible concept could easily come to be mistaken for being a pure, unproblematic representation of the concept itself.

Suissa (2008) points out that the manifestations of happiness that psychometric scales measure may not always be the particular or only manifestations necessary or relevant to a given context, and indeed that there may be other relevant manifestations not captured by such scales. In a sense, this point appears to be congruent with a strand of the present thesis' argument – that many measures of flourishing seem to be “blind” to what specific manifestations of the concept may be meaningful in a given context and instead seem to advocate the measurement of a series of “generic” manifestations. Moreover, concurring with Suissa, I acknowledge that one's evaluation of the appropriateness, completeness, and meaningfulness of a given series of manifestations of this sort is not (exclusively) an empirical matter.

My position with regard to the question of whether flourishing can be measured is that it can – precisely because, as I noted in the opening of this section, it is. However, in taking this position, I explicitly acknowledge that the empirical (psychometric) measurement of flourishing is necessarily measurement of certain manifestations of flourishing, defined in specific ways (following Peterson, 2006). More importantly, however, I recognise that such measurement of flourishing cannot – ever – be considered “whole” or “complete.” The intangible nature of flourishing is such that its psychometric measurement – as a form of *empirical* measurement – is necessarily a partial method of assessment, and one that must be complementary to other approaches such as philosophical inquiry. In other words, I argue that the existence and utilisation of psychometric measures of flourishing suggest that the concept *can* be measured, though diverging from the strong empirical stance of mainstream positive psychology, I caution that this form of measurement must be taken with the *caveats* I mentioned above.

Thus, the first assumption on which the work in the present chapter is based is that flourishing is measurable, though subject to certain “terms and conditions” regarding the epistemological remit of psychometric measurement tools. I will return to this point in the Discussion section at the end of this chapter where I consider the manner in which the SOFIA may be used.

### 4.2.2. Should flourishing be measured?

The question of whether flourishing should be measured is perhaps, similar to the question of why we should pursue flourishing which I considered in Chapter One, more in the realm of philosophy than of psychology. Here, I will not address this question by considering philosophically derived reasons for why flourishing should or should not be measured. Instead, I will take a pragmatic approach by examining the reasons why flourishing *is* measured, and then considering whether the measurement of flourishing for such reasons is useful (to any worthwhile end). If it is, then I will suggest flourishing should be measured.

The measurement of flourishing has become increasingly popular in recent times. For several decades (see Sointu, 2005), there has been an increasing interest in measuring and monitoring different forms of wellbeing across a wide range of domains. For example, “wellbeing in the workplace” is now a point of focus in many occupational settings (e.g. Pruyne, Powell & Parsons, 2012). Aspects of flourishing are also being measured in schools (e.g. DEECD, 2013) and in areas such as the military (e.g. Seligman’s “comprehensive soldier fitness” programme; see Lester, Harms, Herian, Krasikova & Beal, 2011, and Seligman, 2011). For several decades also, flourishing has been measured and monitored at the national and societal levels within social surveys such as the European Social Survey (ESS; see Huppert, Marks, Clark, Siegrist, Stutzer, Vittersø, et al., 2009; Huppert & So, 2013) and the Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP; Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, 2013). Since 1972, the Kingdom of Bhutan has been measuring population flourishing as part of their “Gross National Happiness” programme, in which wellbeing is used as the primary indicator of social progress rather than Gross Domestic Product or other economic indicators (Evans, 2001; Revkin, 2005). There are also a few large-scale global surveys of flourishing that aim to monitor changes and trends in wellbeing across countries, cultures, and demographic groups; these include the Gallup World Poll (see Diener & Diener, 2011) and the International Wellbeing Study (Jarden, Simpson, McLachlan, Kashdan, MacKenzie & Jose, in preparation). What purpose is there in measuring flourishing in these ways?

The New Economics Foundation (nef) has recently published a “how to” guidebook for freelance and non-academic sector researchers on measuring flourishing in applied settings (Michaelson, Mahoney & Schifferes, 2012). They give several reasons for measuring flourishing, such as to:

Help evaluate the impact of...project[s] or service[s] on people's lives; Develop a baseline of information against which...[one]...can measure changes over time in people's feelings or experiences, for example over the course of a particular intervention; Find out which aspects of their lives people feel most dissatisfied with, for example in order to help tailor interventions; Help raise awareness of the different components of well-being among a particular population, for example in order to help facilitate community-led action to increase well-being (Michaelson et al., 2012, p. 9).

As I argued in Chapter Three, I take the position that flourishing is a socially constructed concept (or discourse; Sointu, 2005) that is dynamic and subject to change as cultures and values change over time (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008). Thus, I assert that flourishing has arisen as an alternative/progressive ideal in many domains of life that replaces or complements more traditional indicators of the success of programmes or social institutions. It is this position of being an ideal (something to strive for, or enhance) that gives rise to the necessity to measure flourishing. In other words, the concept must be measured in order to assess current flourishing and the effectiveness of any means of enhancing it.

An example of the new status of flourishing as an ideal worth enhancing is in education. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the purpose of education (the question "What are we trying to achieve?") has undergone cultural transition throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, moving from essentialism to a gradual re-orientation towards creativity, critical/analytical thinking and whole child development or flourishing (Noddings, 1995b, 2003; Seligman, 2008). Following this, intervention programmes such as the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP; Gillham et al., 1990) and other positive education curricula have been developed and implemented to enhance flourishing, which, in turn, requires measurement. This new focus on wellbeing as a cultural ideal in education appears to have led to increased measurement and monitoring of the construct for two key purposes: assessing existing levels of flourishing and evaluating the effectiveness of numerous programmes and other interventions aimed at enhancing students' flourishing. Assessment of current levels of flourishing helps researchers and practitioners assess the degree to which individuals or societies are well and functioning optimally (subject to particular definitions), while evaluation of programmes and interventions helps them assess whether the means they develop and apply to enhance flourishing are effective in achieving this. Together, assessment and evaluation contribute to the complex ways in which sociocultural, philosophical and other conceptualisations of flourishing are applied to and practiced in everyday settings. Apart from educational interventions, flourishing may be measured as part of

programmes in occupational, psychotherapeutic, neurorehabilitative and other settings for these purposes.

Is measuring flourishing for the purpose of enhancing flourishing a useful pursuit? At the beginning of this section I suggested that if the measurement of flourishing contributes to the pursuit of some worthwhile end, then flourishing should indeed be measured. If flourishing is an ideal worth pursuing – and, as the reader will recall, I argued in Chapter One that it is – then measuring it for the purpose of its enhancement appears to be a useful pursuit, and, therefore, it could be argued that flourishing should be measured. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that in arguing this, I remain aware of the caveats regarding the *empirical* measurement of flourishing that I discussed in section 4.2.1, and it is therefore worth reiterating that flourishing should be measured empirically (but not only empirically) as long as these *caveats* are observed.

Why flourishing in higher education in particular should be measured empirically, I will address a little later, in the Rationale section for this chapter.

### **4.2.3. If flourishing is measured psychometrically, how is it measured?**

This chapter concerns the development of a psychometric scale. How are things measured when they are measured psychometrically? Are they measured objectively or subjectively? More importantly, how does psychometric measurement “fit” the relational ontological perspective I discussed in Chapter One? I discussed in that chapter the major philosophical and psychological perspectives on the nature of flourishing – objective and subjective perspectives (e.g. Aristotle, 350BC/2000; Mill, 1950).<sup>37</sup> I return to these briefly here because the way one measures flourishing – objectively or subjectively – must necessarily be derived from one’s conception of it.

As noted previously, objective accounts of flourishing hold that the criteria that constitute or lead to flourishing can be objectively determined and that an individual fulfilling such criteria can be considered to flourish regardless of whether he or she endorses this evaluation (e.g. Aristotle, 350BC/2000). On the other hand, subjective accounts defend the necessity of an individual’s subjective experience of flourishing – their endorsement of the evaluation that they are flourishing, or their own determination of the criteria that constitute or lead to it. Similar to existing arguments (e.g. de Ruyter, 2004; Slife & Richardson, 2008; Younkins, 2008), I take a middle position on the nature

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<sup>37</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I delineate objective and subjective theories of flourishing from eudaimonic and hedonic ones. I explained this distinction in footnote 1, p. 2.

of flourishing which coincides largely with the relational ontological perspective on flourishing described by Slife and Richardson (2008). Specifically, as I argued in Chapter One, a list of goods necessary for human flourishing can be determined, but such a list cannot be truly objective. Instead, it is at best intersubjective, or defined on the basis of consensus. Hence, flourishing is inherently a product of social construction, and thus “located” or “situated” in time and culture. Following this, individuals interpret and pursue (or do not pursue) the goods on the list in ways subjectively meaningful to them.

Bearing in mind this position, the psychometric measurement of flourishing (or any intangible concept) is essentially an infusion of objective and subjective measurement, and it is bound by both the strengths and the limitations of these measurement types. Objective measurement is limited by the degree of intersubjectivity we are able to establish with one another regarding the particular goods that constitute or lead to flourishing. Thus, if a psychometric scale contains certain items that are regarded by people to be pertinent to the concept the scale measures, such items may be the subject of disagreement among people. Similarly, subjective measurement is limited by the various factors established to affect self-report-based assessment (e.g. social desirability, boredom, response sets, social biases; see Chan, 2009, for a detailed review of challenges in self-report data). How one measures flourishing, then, is by first agreeing on what it is (in the context in which one is interested in measuring it) and subsequently by allowing individuals to rate their interpretation of their own flourishing against each of the goods determined to be linked with it. The objective (intersubjective) list of goods a measure of flourishing assesses in an individual is derived from the constructed understanding of flourishing in context and the measurement of flourishing by the above means is inherently subjective because individuals respond via self-report. A psychometric measure of flourishing in higher education may be understood to “fit” into the relational ontological perspective advocated by Slife and Richardson (2008) and others in this way. Such a measure could be understood to assess what might be called “constructed context-specific subjective flourishing”: Constructed because its objective definition is agreed upon by people, context-specific because it pertains to higher education, and subjective because it utilises self-report.

Having introduced philosophical considerations in the measurement of flourishing, I will now review some of the major measures of flourishing. I review these in two groups:

general measures and measures specifically developed for and/or used in educational settings.

### **4.3. General measures of wellbeing**

#### **4.3.1. Overview**

Along with the increase in psychological literature on wellbeing, development of wellbeing measurement tools has progressed rapidly since the 1970s, with the volume of valid and reliable wellbeing scales and questionnaires constantly on the rise (see Jarden, 2011, and Lopez & Snyder, 2003, for reviews). The current range of wellbeing measurement tools span constructs from general wellbeing and flourishing to positive emotions and life satisfaction to resilience, hope, and optimism (Lopez & Snyder, 2003).

There are several major measures worth noting as part of this introduction. For example, the Happiness Measures are a two-part psychometric tool that assess emotions and have been argued to be the most widely administered and psychometrically sound measure of affect currently available (Diener, 1984; Fordyce, 1988). Another widely used and validated wellbeing measure is the Satisfaction With Life Scale, a short tool assessing overall life satisfaction, or a generalised cognitive evaluation of one's life (Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffin, 1985). The measure has also been used in hundreds of studies, consistently demonstrating sound psychometric properties across a variety of settings (see Pavot & Diener, 2008, for a comprehensive review). Other well-known measures include Michael Argyle's (Argyle, Martin & Crossland, 1989) Oxford Happiness Inventory and updated Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988), and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Tennant, Hiller, Fishwick, Platt, Joseph, Weich et al., 2007). Apart from measures of overall wellbeing and subjective wellbeing (positive emotions and life satisfaction), many tools exist that assess more specific wellbeing-related constructs, such as character strengths (e.g. Peterson & Seligman, 2004), mindfulness (e.g. Brown & Ryan, 2003) and gratitude (e.g. McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002). New scales and assessment tools continue to be developed and validated as more wellbeing constructs are identified and theoretically conceptualised.

The measurement tools I will review in more detail here are those associated with existing positive psychological theories of global flourishing and other major positive psychological approaches to overall wellbeing. These particular measures were selected for review on the basis of their association with the different conceptualisations

of flourishing, or states of overall wellbeing, as opposed to facets or compartmentalised aspects of flourishing such as happiness, life satisfaction, or engagement. Specifically, my discussion will centre on Keyes' (2002) measure of the Mental Health Continuum, the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010), Ryff's (1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) Scales of Psychological Well-Being, the Basic Psychological Needs Scales associated with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and the Well-Being Theory Questionnaire (Butler & Kern, in preparation; Seligman, 2011).

Important aspects of each of the reviewed scales are summarised in Table 4.1 (p. 123).

**Table 4.1. Summary of general measures of wellbeing.**

MEASURE	AUTHOR(S)	DESCRIPTION	DERIVATION METHOD / PERSPECTIVE ON MEASUREMENT
Mental Health Continuum Battery	Keyes (2002)	40-item, 3-factor measure of flourishing mental health assessing dimensions of psychological, subjective and social wellbeing. High scores on all three dimensions regarded as indicative of high flourishing mental health. Other levels of mental health include moderate mental health, languishing, and mental illness. Psychometric properties generally sound.	Derived from theories of psychological (Ryff, 1989), subjective (Diener, 1984), and social wellbeing (Keyes, 1998). Measures an objectively determined conceptualisation of flourishing mental health.
Mental Health Continuum Short Form	Keyes (2009a)	14-item condensed version of Keyes' (2002) Mental Health Continuum Battery. Psychometric properties generally sound and replicated in several countries.	As above
Flourishing Scale	Diener et al. (2010)	8-item brief measure of "psychosocial prosperity," composed of eight domains such as purpose/meaning, prosocial behaviour etc. Psychometric properties generally sound and replicated in several countries.	Items derived from theories and research in the area of general wellbeing, including purpose/meaning, prosocial behaviour, psychological and social capital, and relationships. Measures an objectively determined conceptualisation of general wellbeing.
Scales of Psychological Wellbeing	Ryff (1989)	Available in numerous versions, including 12-, 18-, 24-, 42-, 54-, 84- and 120-item versions. Assesses six dimensions of psychological wellbeing (self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life, personal growth, and autonomy; Ryff, 1989). Psychometric properties widely researched but disagreed upon.	Derived from theoretical and research literature on psychological wellbeing (e.g. Bradburn, 1969).
Basic Psychological Needs Scale	Gagné (2003)	21-item, 3-factor measure of satisfaction of basic psychological needs in general (autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Versions of the scale also exist for domains of work and relationships.	Derived from theoretical and research literature on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Measures an objectively determined conceptualisation of self-determination as an enabling factor for wellbeing.
Well-Being Theory Questionnaire	Butler & Kern (in preparation)	Scale development in progress	Items derived from comprehensive literature review of each of five aspects of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Assesses an objectively determined conceptualisation of flourishing as a form of overall wellbeing constituted by the factors within the PERMA model.

### 4.3.2. Mental Health Continuum Battery

I discussed Keyes' (2002) theory of flourishing as positive mental health in greater detail in Chapter One. In summary, contrary to the pathological focus of 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology, Keyes conceptualises flourishing as complete positive mental health – including, importantly, the presence of positive psychological functioning – rather than just the absence of disorder (see also Keyes, 2007a, 2007b). Keyes first proposed the measurement of flourishing mental health should be via a 40-item Mental Health Continuum (MHC) battery (see Table 4.1, p. 123), including:

- A 6-item measure of positive affect (see Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998)
- A single-item measure of life satisfaction (together with the positive affect scale above these constitute the subjective wellbeing component of the tool)
- The short (18-item) version of Ryff's (1989) Scales of Psychological Well-Being
- The 15-item measure of social wellbeing reported in Keyes (1998)

The components of the original MHC (reported in Keyes, 2002) were validated separately in previous studies (see Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Keyes, 1998; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and demonstrated generally acceptable levels of reliability (primarily internal consistency). The “diagnosis” system for classifying individuals into states of flourishing, moderate mental health, languishing, and mental illness produces a generally normal distribution (with slight negative skew) across samples representative of the general adult population (e.g. Keyes, 2002). A brief version of the original MHC battery (the MHC short form, or MHC-SF) has also been developed and is in more common use because of its greater practicality (see Keyes, 2009a).

Psychometric properties of the MHC-SF have been explored in several cultural settings and found to be generally favourable. For example, Keyes, Wissing, Potgieter, Temane, Kruger and van Rooy (2008) explored the MHC-SF in 1050 Setswana-speaking adults in South Africa, reporting their results replicated the 3-factor structure of flourishing (subjective, psychological, and social wellbeing) and the 2-continua model of mental health and mental illness previously found in US samples. Results also indicated good internal consistency. The 2-continua model has also been confirmed for samples of 1340 Dutch adults (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010) and 509 French physical education students (Salama-Younes, 2011a) and the 3-factor structure of flourishing mental health has been confirmed in samples of adults (Gallagher, Lopez & Preacher, 2009), university students (Robitschek & Keyes, 2009), and adolescents aged 12-18 (Keyes, 2009b) in the US, and in South African (Keyes et al., 2008) and Dutch samples

(Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, ten Klooster & Keyes, 2011). However, an attempt to confirm the 3-factor structure in a sample of Egyptian adolescents was only successful with nine of the 14 MHC-SF items (Salama-Younes, 2011b). Application of Keyes' measurement tools to educational settings have also indicated favourable convergent and divergent validity, with flourishing mental health being consistently associated with better academic performance and lower suicidal behaviour (Howell, 2009; Keyes, Eisenberg, Perry, Dube, Kroenke & Dhingra, 2012) and higher life satisfaction and subjective vitality and lower psychological distress (Salama-Younes, 2011a, 2011b).

Finally, it is useful to mention here some research which has measured flourishing mental health in large-scale samples by applying an operationalised definition of the construct to European Social Survey (ESS) data (Huppert et al., 2009). Specifically, setting out from Keyes' (2002) assertion that mental health is the positive opposite of mental illness rather than just the lack of it, Huppert and So (2009) took the DSM diagnostic criteria for depression and anxiety and identified their opposites. This led to the "linking up" of these newly identified features of flourishing with existing survey items in the Well-Being Module of the ESS (Huppert et al., 2009). By computing the percentages of individuals agreeing or strongly agreeing with these survey items, measurement of the prevalence of flourishing mental health has become possible across most European nations (see Huppert & So, 2011).

### **4.3.3. Scales of Psychological Well-Being**

Psychological wellbeing is measured with Ryff's (1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) Scales of Psychological Well-Being (SPWB), a battery composed of six subscales corresponding to the six theoretically derived components of psychological wellbeing: Self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life, personal growth, and autonomy (see Table 4.1, p. 123). The original measurement tool, reported in Ryff (1989; scale available directly from author) contained a total of 120 items (20 per subscale), though the current longest-length version used has 84 items (14 per subscale). Medium-length (54 items; 9 per subscale) and short (18 items; 3 per subscale) versions of the scales also exist, along with other versions suggested in psychometric replication studies (for example, there is a 24-item version suggested by Cheng and Chan, 2005, and 12- and 42-item versions tested by Springer and Hauser, 2006).

Although the initial 120-item version of the scale exhibited favourable psychometric properties (Ryff, 1989), subsequent validation attempts by independent researchers on all six currently available versions of the scale (12-, 18-, 24-, 42-, 54-, and 84-item versions) have produced inconsistent results in both factorial replicability

and internal consistency reliability. For example, Clark, Marshall, Ryff and Wheaton (2001) were able to replicate Ryff and Keyes' (1995) 6-factor structure for the 18-item version but failed to obtain acceptable internal consistency of subscales for all models tested, as did Cheng and Chan (2005). Validation attempts for the 120-item version (Kafka & Kozma, 2002), the 84-item version (van Dierendonck, 2004), the 54-item version (van Dierendonck, 2004) and the 42-item version (Springer & Hauser, 2006; Abbott, Ploubdis, Huppert, Kuh, Wadsworth & Croudance, 2006) exhibited generally inconsistent factor solutions, mostly failing to replicate the original *a priori* 6-factor structure. Ryff (personal communication, 2010) recommends against using the 18-item version of the SPWB, arguing that it "does not do a good job of covering the content of the six well-being constructs" (para. 2).

Contention on the psychometric robustness of Ryff's scales remains ongoing (e.g. Ryff & Singer, 2006; Springer, Hauser & Freese, 2006). Despite this, applications of the scales have been prolific. Most applications of the scale have been in research or applied settings related to lifespan development and psychogeriatrics (e.g. Ebner, Freund & Baltes, 2006; Fleeson & Heckhausen, 1997; Grün, Rebucal, Diehl, Lumley & Labouvie-Vief, 2008; Spruytte, Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999). However, numerous applications also exist in psychotherapeutic settings; for example the scales have been used in evaluating the effectiveness of a form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (see Butler, Chapman, Forman & Beck, 2006) in preventing relapse of depression (Fava, Rafanelli, Grandi, Conti & Belluardo, 1998) and of integrative therapy for treating depression (Hayes & Harris, 2000).

Ryff's SPWB have also been applied widely to research in educational settings, including both schools and higher education institutions (Seifert, 2005). This has involved numerous studies on the relationships between students' individual differences and psychological wellbeing (for example perfectionism, see Chang, 2006, school satisfaction, see Jin & Moon, 2006, and imposter feelings and gender role orientation, see September, McCarrey, Baranowsky, Parent & Schindler, 2001). Other educational applications have focused on the development and evaluation of psychotherapeutic and other interventions aimed at enhancing psychological wellbeing in school-aged children and youth, such as Well-being Therapy (Ruini, Belaise, Brombin, Caffo & Fava, 2006; Ruini, Ottolini, Tomba, Belaise, Albieri, Visani et al., 2009).

#### **4.3.4. Flourishing Scale**

The Flourishing Scale (FS) is a brief 8-item measure of psychosocial prosperity, conceptualised as generalised wellbeing stemming from the eight specific facets of

wellbeing discussed in Chapter One (Diener et al., 2010; see Table 4.1, p. 123). The scale was initially called the Psychological Well-Being Scale (see Diener, Wirtz, Biswas-Diner, Tov, Kim-Prieto, Choi, et al., 2009) though was later renamed to reflect the broader theoretical base from which its items were developed (for example, it includes items drawn from the literature on optimism and social capital, which are not immediately included in the conceptualisation of PWB narrowly defined). Diener, Wirtz, et al. (2009) report that in a sample of 537 university students in the US and Singapore, the FS exhibited sound psychometric properties, including high internal consistency and temporal stability. Consistent with its purpose to measure generalised/overall rather than specific flourishing, the FS was also found to be factorially unidimensional, and correlated well with several general wellbeing measures used to assess convergent validity. Similar psychometric properties are reported in Diener et al. (2010).

Because the FS was developed relatively recently, published attempts to replicate its psychometric properties or utilise it in applied research are limited. Nevertheless, those that are available have reported findings generally consistent with Diener, Wirtz, et al. (2009) and Diener et al. (2010), indicating the FS behaves in a stable manner across populations. For example, an application to a sample of 529 Turkish pre-service teachers confirmed the scale's unifactorial structure, internal consistency, temporal stability, and appropriate convergence with Ryff's (1989; adapted by Akın, 2008) SPWB and Deci and Ryan's (1991; adapted by Balcanlı & Cihangir-Çankaya, 2003) Basic Psychological Needs Scales (see Telef, 2011). Khodarahimi (2012) applied the FS to a random sample of 300 community residents (aged 15-80) in Iran and also reported a unidimensional structure and appropriate correlations with measures of positive and negative emotions. Interestingly, level of education was found to significantly contribute to higher levels of flourishing in this sample, which reflects a general trend found in wellbeing/education research (e.g. Office for National Statistics, 2012a). Finally, an application to a large Portuguese sample also successfully replicated the original single-factor solution and found the FS to behave consistently with the original version (Junça Silva & Caetano, 2013).

#### **4.3.5. Well-Being Theory Questionnaire**

The Well-Being Theory Questionnaire (WBTQ) is a measurement tool currently under development (Butler & Kern, 2011; see Table 4.1, p. 123) which will assess the five components of the PERMA model of flourishing (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement) proposed in Well-Being Theory (Seligman,

2011). The questionnaire items were generated on the basis of a large-scale review of existing psychometric measures of each of the five Well-Being Theory facets, leading to an initial pool of 199 items (Butler & Kern, 2011). Examination of factorial structure and internal consistency testing from an administration of the items to an initial sample of 351 participants resulted in a condensed questionnaire containing 53 items (Butler & Kern, 2011). The revised 53-item WBTQ is currently being administered to a larger representative sample in the US and internationally for further factorial, reliability and validity testing (Butler & Kern, in preparation). Initial results from this work suggest the WBTQ exhibits high internal consistency reliability (Kern, personal communication, 2013).

#### **4.3.6. Basic Psychological Needs Scale**

The Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS; Gagné, 2003) is a measurement tool developed to assess the three fundamental psychological needs postulated by Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Deci & Ryan, 1985; see Table 4.1, p. 123) to be necessary for human flourishing. Three versions of the scale exist. The first, a generic version, is composed of 21 items (7 per subscale). The two other versions of the measure have been developed to assess self-determination in specific contexts – occupational (21 items) and intimate relationships (9 items) – with the wording of the items being adapted for relevance to these contexts. Applications and evaluations of the BPNS have been widespread, particularly in occupational settings where it has been used to investigate factors such as job satisfaction (Ilardi, Leone, Kasser & Ryan, 1993), motivation and dependability (Kasser, Davey & Ryan, 1992), and wellbeing in the workplace (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov & Kornazheva, 2001). More recently, Weinstein, Przybylsky and Ryan (2012) have developed a new SDT-based measurement tool for assessing autonomous functioning on its own, which they report is initially valid and reliable, and acceptably predictive of measures of wellbeing and positive communication in dyads. The BPNS has also been translated and/or reconstructed and validated in non-US cultures (e.g. Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens & Lens, 2010).

Self-determination theory is readily applicable to educational settings. Its measures have been applied in a wide cross-section of research on student motivation. One notable area of such research is on the social-contextual influences on students' intrinsic motivation, for example the roles played by positive and negative feedback, teaching style and level of interpersonal involvement, imposition of deadlines, and the

offering of rewards for certain behaviours on students' self-determination (see Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991, for a detailed review, especially pp. 332-338).

#### **4.3.7. Strengths and limitations**

General measures of flourishing and wellbeing are useful in applications to whole populations and as practical, cost-effective assessments of overall wellbeing or its theoretically derived facets (for example, in the Gallup World Poll; Diener & Diener, 2011). However, with the exception of BPNS, prevailing theories of flourishing do not have associated with them measurement tools that are context-specific, i.e. designed with content adapted to the nature of flourishing as it is constructed in a specific context or set of contexts. Instead, existing measures assess overall wellbeing or wellbeing across life domains. In situations in which we might wish to assess flourishing as it occurs in a specific context, such general measures are unable to indicate the degree to which they flourish in that context. I propose two prominent reasons for this. Firstly, when responding to measurement tools which assess overall wellbeing, individuals tend to evaluate their flourishing by taking into account all relevant life domains or contexts, or their life as a whole (similar to measures of life satisfaction), even if they are responding to the tools within a specific context. Thus, one cannot evaluate context-specific flourishing with measures of general wellbeing because the relative contribution of flourishing in individual life domains or contexts become "lost" or "diluted" once combined to arrive at an overall assessment of global wellbeing/flourishing. The second reason general measures of wellbeing are problematic for use in specific contexts is that the measurement tools themselves contain generic rather than contextualised items (items like "How happy are you [in general]?") and thus, the content, wording, focus, and number of the items may not be specifically relevant to the culturally constructed nuances of human flourishing in a particular context.

In conclusion, in the same fashion as testing for a g factor of general intelligence (see Chapter One, footnote 10, pp. 12-13), general wellbeing measures do not give assessments of flourishing in specific life domains, and this presents a challenge in assessing flourishing in contexts such as education, where interventions and other programmes may benefit from tailoring to facilitate flourishing-in-context, i.e. flourishing in education. However, there are several wellbeing measurement systems/tools currently in use in educational settings that have been developed specifically for use in this specific context, and I will now turn to considering these.

## **4.4. Measures of wellbeing specific to educational settings**

### **4.4.1. Overview**

Particularly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a wide variety of parameters of student wellbeing, educational provision and quality have been introduced into both compulsory-level and post-compulsory education sectors (e.g. Fraillon, 2004; Toronto Catholic District School Board, 2011). It should be acknowledged that these are too numerous to review exhaustively here; thus, I will focus on two major forms of measurement in educational settings – two large-scale student surveys currently used in the higher education sectors in the UK and US, and several measures developed for educational settings using positive psychological theory but not currently in widespread use across the sectors. Specifically, I will discuss here the National Student Survey used in the UK higher education sector and the National Survey of Student Engagement used in the US; followed by the Gallup Student Poll, the Wellbeing Inventory of Secondary Education and the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale in compulsory-level education, and the Thriving Quotient and the Students' Psychosocial Well-Being Inventory in post-compulsory education. Key information on these tools are summarised in Table 4.2 overleaf.

**Table 4.2. Summary of wellbeing measures specific to educational contexts.**

<b>MEASURE</b>	<b>AUTHOR(S)</b>	<b>LEVEL OF EDUCATION / COUNTRY</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>DERIVATION METHOD / PERSPECTIVE ON MEASUREMENT</b>
National Student Survey	Richardson, Slater & Wilson (2007)	Higher education, UK	22-item UK-wide survey of student satisfaction with educational services provided by further and higher education institutions. Survey assesses satisfaction in six areas: teaching, organisation, feedback, assessment, development, workload, support, resources, and other).	Derived from comprehensive theoretical and research literature review of student satisfaction and survey-based student feedback. Measures an objectively determined conceptualisation of satisfaction within the context of higher education.
National Survey of Student Engagement	Kuh (2001)	Higher education, US, Canada	86-item survey widely administered across US and Canada. Assesses students' engagement with university life, including classes, coursework, campus activities, academic staff, and peers.	Derived from comprehensive literature review of research in learning and pedagogy. Measures an objectively determined conceptualisation of student engagement as a valued educational good.
Gallup Student Poll	Lopez et al., (2010)	Secondary school, US	Has 13- and 20-item versions. Administered widely across high schools in the US. Assesses dimensions of hope, engagement, and general wellbeing. Psychometric properties generally sound.	Items based upon theoretical and empirical literature on constructs of hope, engagement, and general wellbeing. Measures an objectively determined set of variables considered as positive indicators within schools.
Wellbeing Inventory for Secondary Education	Engels et al., (2004)	Secondary school, Flanders	Available in 117- and 9-item versions. Scale assesses feelings, satisfaction, behaviour, and general evaluations of wellbeing. Exhibits good psychometric properties.	Items derived inductively from extensive fieldwork in school settings. Measures a conceptualisation of student wellbeing subjectively determined at the context level.
Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale	Huebner (2001)	Primary and secondary schools, US	40-item, 5-factor measure of life satisfaction in school-aged children and youth. Assesses satisfaction in domains of family, friends, school, living environment, and self. Generally sound psychometric properties.	Items generated on the basis of theoretical and research literature on the construct of life satisfaction (e.g. Diener, 1984).
Thriving Quotient	Schreiner, McIntosh, et al. (2009)	Higher education, US	25-item, 5-factor measure of thriving in higher education settings. Assesses thriving in domains of engaged learning, academic determination, diverse citizenship, positive perspective, and social connectedness. High internal consistency reported.	Items selected and combined from existing psychometric measures of general wellbeing and facets of wellbeing in educational settings. Measures an objectively determined conceptualisation of thriving in university settings.
Students' Psychosocial Wellbeing Inventory	Negovan (2010)	Higher education, Romania, Latvia	17-item, 4-factor measure of psychosocial wellbeing in university students. Assesses wellbeing in domains of general subjective wellbeing, university-related subjective wellbeing, psychological wellbeing university and social wellbeing at university. Preliminary evidence for acceptable psychometric properties.	Items generated on the basis of a literature review of research on subjective (Diener, 1984), psychological (Ryff, 1989) and social wellbeing (Keyes, 1998). Measures an objectively determined conceptualisation of psychosocial wellbeing in university settings.

#### **4.4.2. National Student Survey**

The National Student Survey (NSS) is a large-scale survey administered to final-year undergraduate students at the majority of universities and some further education colleges in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and, more recently, Scotland (e.g. Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2010; see Table 4.2, p. 131). It has been administered annually since 2005 (Richardson, Slater & Wilson, 2007). Prior to 2000, institutional subject reviews were used to evaluate educational quality in universities, but this was discontinued after reports of excessive cost. Following the establishment of a HEFCE task force in 2001 to find an alternative method of quality assessment, Richardson et al. (2007) were commissioned to develop the NSS during 2003-4 in a series of pilot studies. The survey's primary functions were to:

- Collect data on students' satisfaction with the perceived quality of their course of study, including aspects such as the quality of teaching and assessments, and administrative aspects of their course; and
- Make this data publicly available, primarily for prospective undergraduate students and other stakeholders in the sector to compare the rated quality of subjects across institutions.

The original measurement tool (see Richardson et al., 2007) was composed of 45 items on 6 subscales generated on the basis of a comprehensive literature review of survey-based student feedback (Williams & Brennan, 2003). The tool was distributed to an initial sample of over 17,000 students and found to possess adequate or near-adequate internal consistency across the six subscales. Exploration of the factorial structure of the scale led to the adoption of a 7-factor scale represented by the most statistically sound 19 scale items (the factors were teaching, feedback, assessment, generic skills, workload, support, and resources) in addition to two further items relating to overall satisfaction. Crucially, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) run on the data with institution and subject group as independent variables revealed variance accounted for by each of these factors alone was relatively low (7% in both cases), whereas the interaction between them accounted for a much higher proportion of variance (24%). This provides statistical evidence that the scale can distinguish between students from different institutions but the same subject group, allowing inter-institutional comparison of perceived quality of courses in a given subject area (hence, meeting the survey's primary purpose). The NSS was developed further in terms of item clarification and adaptation of participant recruitment strategies, and distributed to a second pilot sample of over 9,000 students. Results showed a 9-factor solution (including teaching,

organisation, feedback, assessment, development, workload, support, resources, and other), with a single second-order factor representing overall satisfaction. Scale items also exhibited adequate or near-adequate internal consistency.

Today, the NSS comprises 22 core items (with 6 separate items for students funded by the National Health Service) and is administered during the second half of each academic year. Apart from publishing the survey results each year, HEFCE also reports on trends emerging from time-series analyses of consecutive annual administrations (HEFCE, 2010).

#### **4.4.3. National Survey of Student Engagement**

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a large-scale survey measuring first-year and senior undergraduate students' engagement with a range of educational practices empirically demonstrated to enhance learning and personal development (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research [IUCPR], 2012; see Table 4.2, p. 131). These practices include five "benchmarks" of effective practices: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment (IUCPR, n.d.). The survey's focus on active student participation in academic activities (e.g. class discussions, engagement with staff and peers, extra-curricular reading) differentiates it somewhat from the NSS used in the UK, which could be argued to place the student in a more passive position given its focus on satisfaction with institutional provision of services (cf. Kandiko & Lewthwaite, 2012; Kuh, 2001; Richardson et al., 2007).

Following piloting in the late 1990s, the NSSE has been administered annually to several hundred higher education institutions across the US and Canada since 2000. In 2012, a total of 577 institutions participated, with responses from over 300,000 students (Kuh, 2001; IUCPR, 2012). The original survey (see Kuh, 2001) was comprised of 48 items developed on the basis of a comprehensive review of pedagogic and learning literature. Exploration of the factorial structure of the items revealed a 3-factor solution comprised of "college activities," "personal growth" and "opinions about your school" second-order factors. Internal consistency of each of the three subscales was also found to be high (Kuh, 2001). More recent psychometric evaluations of the tool have demonstrated internal consistency values of subscales arranged by the five benchmarks mentioned above are also adequate or near-adequate (IUCPR, n.d.) and that both individual students and institutions in general exhibit reasonable stability in their responses over time (IUCPR, 2009, 2011).

#### **4.4.4. Gallup Student Poll**

The Gallup Student Poll is a large-scale survey aimed at children and youth in grades 5 through 12 in the US, measuring three key variables: Hope, engagement and wellbeing (Lopez, Agrawal & Calderon, 2010; see Table 4.2, p. 131). Lopez et al. define hope as "...ideas and energy for the future" (2010, p. 5) and indicate that hope can be utilised as a potent driver of positive educational outcomes based on its relationship with better attendance and higher academic performance (e.g. Gallagher & Lopez, 2008; Marques, Pais-Ribeiro & Lopez, 2009). Similarly, engagement is defined as "...involvement in and enthusiasm for school" (Lopez et al., 2010, p. 7) and has been empirically linked to productivity and retention (Gordon, 2006; Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002), while wellbeing is defined as "...how we think about and experience our lives" (Lopez et al., 2010, p. 8) and has consistently been an established predictor of academic success (e.g. Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). Thus, these variables were selected as the focus of the survey because of their theoretically and psychometrically distinct nature and their malleability, which enables enhancement through deliberate intervention programmes (Lopez et al., 2010).

The 20 core Poll items were developed on the basis of extant theoretical, empirical, and psychometric literature on hope, engagement and wellbeing (e.g. Harter, Schmidt, Kilham & Agrawal, 2009; Snyder, 1994) and consultation with a range of established experts (see Lopez et al., 2010). It was piloted in 2008 and has been administered to thousands of school-aged children and youth since its formal launch in 2009. Several psychometric evaluations of the three scales (hope, engagement, and wellbeing) have been conducted and these generally report favourable results. For example, an evaluation of factorial structure in the 2009 administration confirmed the 3-factor structure of a revised 13-item version of the scales, with six items loading clearly onto a "hope" factor, five onto "engagement," and two onto "wellbeing." Each of the subscales was found to be adequate or near-adequate in internal consistency, while correlations with several related wellbeing measures (including satisfaction, gratitude, and character strengths) indicated initially favourable convergent validity (Lopez et al., 2010).

Because the Poll was launched relatively recently, psychometric evaluations remain ongoing, with further analyses planned for assessing temporal stability and predictive validity of the measures.

#### **4.4.5. Wellbeing Inventory of Secondary Education**

The Wellbeing Inventory of Secondary Education (WISE) was developed as a brief measure of general student wellbeing in the context of secondary schools (Engels, Aelterman, Van Petegem, Schepens & Deconinck, 2004; see Table 4.2, p. 131). WISE assesses student wellbeing in seven key areas: Wellbeing in the classroom, wellbeing at school, parental involvement, contact with friends, study pressure, curriculum, and behaviour and general wellbeing (Cuyvers, De Weerd, Dupont, Mols & Nuytten, 2011). Interestingly, the scale was developed with specific consideration of contextual variables and broader issues in Flemish secondary schools (Engels et al., 2004). Scale items are grouped into four clusters, including questions relating to feelings, satisfaction, behaviour, and general evaluations of wellbeing.

Both original (117 items; Engels et al., 2004) and condensed (9 items; Van Petegem, Creemers, Aelterman, & Rosseel, 2008) versions of the WISE have been reported to exhibit favourable psychometric properties, including high internal consistency and a clear single-factor structure indicating overall student wellbeing. The WISE also exhibits good content and convergent validity, being developed on the basis of extensive consultation with students and appropriately correlated with other measures of educational and general wellbeing (Engels et al., 2004).

#### **4.4.6. Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale**

The Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) is a measure of life satisfaction developed for school-aged children and youth (Huebner, 1994, 2001; see Table 4.2, p. 131). Life satisfaction may be defined as a cognitive evaluation of how one's life is progressing in general terms (e.g. Pavot, Diener, Colvin & Sandvik, 1991). Huebner (2001) notes that although recent decades have seen a great deal of research – including psychometric work – on adults' life satisfaction (e.g. Diener et al., 1985), attention has been turned to children's life satisfaction only recently. Furthermore, he argues that early psychometric measures of children's life satisfaction were, similar to adult measures, unidimensional or consisted of a single item, failing to capture much of the complexity of the concept. Thus, the MSLSS balances available measures of life satisfaction by representing a means of assessing the concept in children and multidimensionally. Its uniqueness among other mainstream life satisfaction measures is its reflection of life domains relevant to the lives of children. Hence, the 40-item MSLSS is divided into five subscales relating to children's satisfaction with family, friends, school, living environment, and themselves.

Psychometric properties of the MSLSS have been reported to be generally sound (Huebner, 2001). Internal consistency reliability of the scale is acceptable to excellent,

as are test-retest reliability coefficients. Analyses of structure have also generally demonstrated five factors corresponding to the subscales mentioned above, with a single second-order factor representing overall life satisfaction. For example, Greenspoon and Saklofske (1997) confirmed the 5-factor structure and acceptable test-retest reliability of the MSLSS in a sample of Canadian schoolchildren in grades 3 to 8. In their data, MSLSS scores were also found to possess sound convergent validity, correlating well with measures of global life satisfaction and appropriate personality characteristics. Apart from children (Huebner, 1994), the MSLSS has also been applied in educational settings to older adolescents (e.g. Gilman, Huebner & Laughlin, 2000) and more recently to university students (Zulling, Gilman, Huebner, Patton & Murray, 2005).

#### **4.4.7. Thriving Quotient**

The Thriving Quotient (TQ) is a measure of thriving (following Benson, 1990) developed specifically for use on students in higher education settings (e.g. Schreiner, McIntosh, et al., 2009; Schreiner et al., 2012; see Table 4.2, p. 131). The TQ was conceived as a measure of overall student wellbeing, including factors that are both malleable and empirically connected to student success (e.g. grades, learning, graduation). I discussed the conceptual nature of Schreiner's thriving in Chapter Three and therefore will not repeat this in detail.

Items were generated on the basis of reviews of both existing theoretical literature and of 13 existing psychometric tools for general and student wellbeing (Schreiner, McIntosh, et al., 2009). The definitive TQ consists of 25 items and has been reported to exhibit a 5-factor structure, including engaged learning, academic determination, diverse citizenship, positive perspective, and social connectedness (Schreiner, McIntosh, et al., 2009). Internal consistency is also reported to be high.

#### **4.4.8. Students' Psychosocial Well-Being Inventory**

The Students' Psychosocial Well-Being Inventory (SPWBI) is a brief multidimensional measure of psychosocial wellbeing developed specifically for higher education students (Negovan, 2010; Table 4.2, p. 131). The scale was developed in the context of Romanian higher education with the aim of providing an additional, more context-sensitive measure of psychosocial wellbeing among students that pertains to the factors that may influence their wellbeing in academic environments.

Negovan (2010) conceptualises psychosocial wellbeing similarly to Keyes' (2002) notion of flourishing mental health. Her scale contains 17 items tapping four areas of psychosocial wellbeing: subjective wellbeing in relation to the everyday lives

of students, subjective wellbeing in relation to students' lives and environment at university, psychological wellbeing in the academic environment, and social wellbeing in the academic environment. The SPWBI does appear to possess favourable preliminary psychometric properties. For example, it has acceptably high internal consistency reliability and moderate correlations with measures of life satisfaction, self-esteem, happiness, subjective vitality, and personal growth initiative (Negovan, 2010). It also exhibits a 4-factor structure congruent with the nature of its items.

At the time of writing, the SPWBI has not been extensively validated on samples outside of Romania. One exception to this, though, is an application to a Latvian university student sample (Vorone, Vorobyov & Negovan, 2012). In this study, students from a Latvian and a Romanian university were compared on levels of psychosocial wellbeing and other wellbeing measures. Whilst overall levels of student wellbeing did not differ between the two groups, the study did replicate the SPWBI's high internal consistency reliability. Furthermore, several interesting findings emerged with regard to students' SPWBI scores across demographic groups. For example, in the Latvian sample, students at higher levels of study had consistency lower levels of subjective wellbeing, while the opposite was true for the overall psychosocial wellbeing of the Romanian sample. Also, male Romanian students had higher psychological and psychosocial wellbeing than female Romanian students, though no gender differences were observed in the Latvian sample. Finally, full time students exhibited consistently higher scores on both subjective wellbeing subscales, social wellbeing and psychosocial wellbeing in comparison to part time students, and this difference was observed across both the Romanian and Latvian samples (Vorone et al., 2012).

#### **4.4.9. Strengths and limitations**

Measures of wellbeing developed specifically for students in educational settings diverge from general measures of wellbeing primarily on the basis that they add contextual detail to the form of wellbeing being measured. This contextual detail is a strength in cases when researchers or practitioners wish to assess wellbeing in a context-specific rather than generic manner. As I noted in Chapter Two, researchers implementing positive education programmes in schools generally assess programme effectiveness using general measures of wellbeing, even though positive education aims to enhance student wellbeing in an educational context. This may be due at least in part to the limited range of well-validated context-specific wellbeing measures that are available for educational settings. Those that do exist, however, such as those I reviewed above, can address the incongruence between what positive education

programmes and interventions aim to achieve and the measures used to evaluate their effectiveness. Thus, if a positive education programme aims to help students flourish at school, then it would be incongruent with the aims of the programme to assess the programme's effectiveness by (only) measuring students' overall wellbeing. In this case, a measure of wellbeing specific to the context of education could be argued to be a more logical tool to assess programme effectiveness.

On the other hand, the education-specific wellbeing measures I have reviewed remain unable to address the measurement of context-specific flourishing in higher education, for at least three reasons.

Firstly, in the case of the NSS (Richardson et al., 2007), the NSSE (Kuh, 2001), the Gallup Student Poll (Lopez et al., 2010) and the MSLSS (Huebner, 2001), these measures do not directly measure any concept akin to flourishing as a form of overall wellbeing. Instead, the NSS and MSLSS assess student satisfaction in higher education or child-relevant life domains, the Gallup poll assesses the distinct concepts of hope, engagement, and generic wellbeing, and the NSSE assesses student engagement.

Secondly, in the case of the TQ (Schreiner, McIntosh, et al., 2009) and SPWBI (Negovan, 2010), these measures do address forms of overall wellbeing akin to flourishing, but they may be argued to be questionable in terms of their epistemological basis. Specifically, their items assess a form of context-specific flourishing that is theory-driven (i.e. contextualised in a top-down fashion by researcher, congruent with a quantitative-empirical paradigm) rather than data-driven (i.e. contextualised inductively from the context itself, congruent with a qualitative-constructionist paradigm). For example, the items of the SPWBI were generated by the researcher (Negovan, 2010) on the basis of a literature review of theoretical/empirical work on flourishing (e.g. Diener, 1984; Keyes, 2002; Ryff, 1989). This suggests that the wellbeing measured by these tools is not constructed context-specific wellbeing, but wellbeing as the theorists responsible for creating the tool deduce it to pertain to the context in question.

Finally, in the case of the WISE (Engels et al., 2004), which assesses context-specific wellbeing and is also derived inductively from the educational context, this measure serves the domain of secondary schools as opposed to other levels of education such as universities.

#### **4.5. Rationale for this study**

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my aim in this phase of the research was to develop and provide initial reliability and validity evidence for the SOFIA, a

measure of student flourishing specific to the context of higher education. SOFIA was envisaged to differ from the major measures of wellbeing reviewed in the above sections in several ways. Specifically, it differs from:

- The general wellbeing measures through its context-specificity;
- The NSS, NSSE, MSLSS, and Gallup Student Poll through its explicit focus on flourishing as a distinct concept;
- The TQ and the SPWBI through a data-driven rather than theory-driven approach to its creation; and
- The WISE through its focus on higher education contexts as opposed to secondary education.

An important gap in the psychometric literature within both positive psychology and positive education is the lack of a measure that assesses constructed flourishing in students. I mentioned in Chapter Two that although many positive education programmes exist to enhance students' flourishing in educational settings, they use generic, theory-driven measures to assess effectiveness. If positive education programmes aim to cultivate a flourishing which is bound to the context of education, a measure of flourishing derived precisely from this context would appear to be a useful contribution to the literature. Such a measure could be used in conjunction with existing measures to complement assessments of general/generic wellbeing with assessments of wellbeing derived from and relevant to the context of higher education.

Before reporting the scale development research, it is necessary to consider two additional issues. These concern the determination of quality in psychometrics and the organisation of the research studies. First, I will turn to the issue of quality.

## **4.6. Quality in psychometrics**

In this section, I will briefly acknowledge the key indicators of quality in psychometrics to be addressed in this chapter.

### **4.6.1. Internal consistency reliability**

Internal consistency reliability refers to inter-item congruence within scales (Kline, 1998) and is measured via the statistic 'Cronbach's alpha' (Cronbach, 1951). Conventionally, Cronbach's alpha must be at least 0.7 to be considered acceptable (e.g. Nunnally, 1978).

### **4.6.2. Factorial structure**

Psychometric scales must exhibit a clear, replicable factorial structure (Kline, 1998). A factor solution should comprise a parsimonious number of robust, conceptually meaningful factors (Ferguson, 1954). The solution should explain about 60% of the scale variance (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1995).

#### **4.6.3. Temporal stability**

Temporal stability refers to the degree to which individuals' scores on a scale remain consistent across time (Howitt & Cramer, 2008). First-time/second-time score correlations over 0.7 are regarded acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). The length of intervals may vary (Constantine & Ponterotto, 2006), though generally periods of several weeks are used (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

#### **4.6.4. Construct validity**

A scale with construct validity measures what it purports to measure. There is no singular means of evaluating it; instead, it is assessed via other forms of validity. Here, I will focus on convergent, divergent, and cross-cultural validity.

Convergent and divergent validity are assessed by correlating the scale with conceptually similar and dissimilar scales. Judgement of correlations is related to theoretical considerations and conventions for evaluating correlations. Dancey and Reidy (2011) regard correlations with absolute values below 0.4 weak, below 0.7 moderate, and 0.7 and over strong.

Cross-cultural validity refers to the degree to which a scale has similar reliability and validity to its 'home' setting when it is administered in other cultural settings (Swanepoel & Krüger, 2011).

I will return to the above quality indicators in the Discussion section of this chapter where I will evaluate the degree of psychometric quality observed in the SOFIA.

### **4.7. Organisation of methods and results**

A final issue to note before I report the scale development and validation research is the organisation of the Method and Results sections. In this chapter, because the various aspects of the SOFIA's reliability and validity were investigated in multiple independent samples, I will present each investigation as a separate study. Hence, I will first present the scale development phase of the work as a self-contained study with method and results. This phase included initial assessments of internal consistency reliability and factorial structure. Following this, I will present the scale validation phase of the work which contains separately studies for the SOFIA's convergent and

divergent validity, exploration of relationships with personality traits and consumerist attitudes, temporal stability, replication of factorial structure, and cross-cultural exploration in Australia and New Zealand.

## **4.8. Scale development**

Before the SOFIA could be subjected to validity and reliability testing, initial generation of an item pool was required. In this section I will report how this item pool was created, how items were checked for quality, and how the initial exploratory analyses were run to reduce the item pool to the strongest items.

### **4.8.1. Item generation**

#### **4.8.1.1. Theoretical considerations in item generation**

In the Introduction/Rationale of this chapter I argued that there is a need for a measure of flourishing in higher education that is grounded in constructed understandings rather than being theory-driven. Following this argument, the initial item pool for the SOFIA was derived inductively, directly from the concepts and categories on flourishing that emerged from the qualitative research I reported in Chapter Three. This inductive approach has been advocated by Rowan and Wulff (2007), who argue that

Using qualitative inquiry can be especially useful to researchers in the development of scales. In essence, validity of concepts and inquiries in quantitative research can be enhanced by first being grounded in real life situations and observations through having conversations or interviews from an open perspective (p. 451).

The authors also argue the item writing process should be made as transparent as possible to readers to allow further evaluations of the context from which items came (see also Greenwood & Levin, 2000). The item generation process is described here in this way for this purpose.

Apart from giving consideration to the genuine derivation of items from Chapter Three data and results, several other factors were taken into consideration during item generation.

Firstly, the item pool was designed to be larger and more diverse than was reasonably expected to be necessary for the SOFIA. Loevinger (1957) notes that it is wise to begin psychometric scale construction with an excessively large range of items that covers any and all relevant aspects of the construct being measured. This is because while statistical methods can later be applied to filter out weak or redundant items, no statistical technique is capable of rectifying a *lack* of necessary items. Thus, when developing the present items, I included more items

than necessary and ensured items represented the breadth of the analysis described in Chapter Three.

Another factor considered during item pool generation was the wording of items. Care was taken to word items clearly and succinctly, using simple language and at a level of comprehension appropriate for the population at whom the SOFIA was aimed. Clark and Watson (1995) highlight this is crucial in item generation as careless or ambiguous wording of items may confuse respondents and lead to “contamination” of the scale’s psychometric properties.

A final point of consideration in item generation concerned enabling variability in item responses. Items were designed not to elicit agreement from everyone or no one – that is, they were of a nature that would enable variability among people to be expressed. Items to which everyone or no one would agree are redundant as they do not discriminate between people and therefore contribute nothing to a meaningful scale score (Clark & Watson, 1995).

#### **4.8.1.2. Developing the item pool**

The four data sets analysed in Chapter Three yielded 14 categories regarding students’ understandings of flourishing. However, some of these overlapped conceptually, so it was necessary to “convert” them to a definitive, mutually exclusive set of conceptual areas in which to write scale items (though here I do not mean definitive or mutually exclusive in an absolute sense).

The conversion process was not aimed at abstracting conceptual areas from contextualised categories (Slife & Richardson, 2008) but instead aimed to make the number of conceptual areas for which items were to be written more parsimonious. The conversion of the Chapter Three categories to conceptual areas of flourishing in higher education for the purpose of scale development is presented in Table 4.3 (p. 143). The table shows the original categories from each of the four Chapter Three data sets, how they were merged or split, and the new conceptual areas.

**Table 4.3. Conversion of categories to conceptual areas for scale development.**

<b>DATA SET</b>	<b>ORIGINAL CATEGORY</b>	<b>CONVERSION TO CONCEPTUAL AREA</b>	<b>NEW CONCEPTUAL AREAS</b>
1	Self-actualisation	Incorporated into “self-actualisation and progress”	<i>Self-actualisation and progress</i>
	Success	Incorporated into “success and achievement”	
	Personal/Individual phenomenon	Incorporated into most items	
	Positive affect	Incorporated into “subjective wellbeing”	
2	Academic/social engagement	With consideration of the distinct nature of academic versus social engagement, these were split into “academic engagement” and “social engagement”	<i>Subjective wellbeing</i>
	Success	Incorporated into “success and achievement”	
	Wellbeing	Split into “self-actualisation and progress” and “subjective wellbeing”	
3	Engagement	Split into “academic engagement” and “social engagement”	<i>Academic engagement</i>
	Commitment to learning	Carried over as a conceptual area without revision as it emerged as a distinct, unique category	
	Vitality and personal growth	Split into “vitality” and “self-actualisation and progress”	
4	Lacking	Data Set 4 categories were incorporated into all conceptual areas by including negatively worded items	<i>Social engagement</i>
	Disengagement		
	Ineffective functioning		
	Absence of vitality and striving		
			<i>Vitality</i>
			<i>Commitment to learning</i>
			<i>Success and achievement</i>

The seven conceptual areas of flourishing in higher education that were created from the analyses carried out in Chapter Three formed the structural framework within which items were written. The item pool consisted of 138 items covering all seven conceptual areas in approximately equal proportions.

Examples of items (with conceptual area intended to be tapped in parentheses) are as follows: “I am striving to reach my full potential at university” (*self-actualisation and progress*), “I feel happy at university” (*subjective wellbeing*), “I revise my subject matter extensively before exams” (*academic engagement*), “I feel that I am a sociable student” (*social engagement*), “Studying my subject matter makes me feel alive” (*vitality*), “I want to learn as much as possible at university” (*commitment to learning*), and “The grades I obtain at university are usually above average” (*success and achievement*).

The next step in the process of scale development was the review of items for quality. This is addressed in the next section.

#### **4.8.2. Item quality review**

I conducted the item pool generation exercise described above individually. Due to this, it was necessary for the items to be independently reviewed for quality (for example, succinctness, clarity, appropriate reflection of relevant conceptual areas of flourishing). This was done with an “expert rating” exercise in which items in the pool were rated for quality by a panel of subject matter experts.

##### **4.8.2.1. Expert rating forms**

The items were divided into two equivalent halves and embedded into two identical “expert rating forms” (see Appendix E for one of the forms). The rating forms were structured in a 69x7 cell format and divided into three sections. Section 1 required each item to be rated for its suitability as a measure of each of the seven conceptual areas in which items were generated. Ratings were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, “The item is a completely unsuitable measure of the given subscale,” to 5, “The item is a completely suitable measure of the given subscale.” Section 2 asked for experts to rate each of the seven conceptual areas used to generate the item pool in terms of how relevant they thought the items were to flourishing in higher education. These ratings were also given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, “The given subscale is completely irrelevant to ‘flourishing in higher education,’” to 5, “The given subscale is a completely relevant dimension of ‘flourishing in higher education.’” Finally, Section 3 included three open comment boxes in which the experts could include additional

comments regarding the items, such as criticisms on item wording or clarity or superfluous, irrelevant, or lacking items.

#### **4.8.2.2. The expert panel**

The expert rating forms were distributed to a panel of subject matter experts at the University of East London. Experts were required to be knowledgeable about either or both positive psychology and teaching and learning in higher education. Potential panel members were drawn from existing research groups within the School of Psychology and were sent an email regarding the nature of the review exercise and asking whether they were willing to participate. Those agreeing were then sent one of the two equivalent expert rating forms (see Appendix E). The final panel was composed of six academic staff members within the School of Psychology who were active teachers and researchers in positive psychology ( $N=2$ ) and higher education ( $N=4$ ). Panel members completed the expert rating forms independently and returned them via email. This process took approximately 8 weeks.

#### **4.8.2.3. Selection of best items**

Items were selected from the initial item pool for inclusion in the SOFIA in two rounds.

In Round 1, items were selected from the pool on the basis of high mean ratings across expert raters *on the specific conceptual area they were intended to tap*, and low mean ratings on other conceptual areas. “High” mean ratings were operationally defined as a mean rating of at least 4.33 (out of 5) across expert raters, while “low” mean ratings were below 3.00 (out of 5) across raters.<sup>38</sup> Items selected in Round 1 were considered to be those reflecting measurement of a *single* conceptual area of flourishing in academia.

In Round 2, additional items were selected using the same rating criteria used in Round 1; however, in this instance, the “single conceptual area” criterion was not used, meaning items with high (above 4.33) mean ratings on more than one conceptual area and low (below 3.00) mean ratings on the other conceptual areas were also selected for

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<sup>38</sup> An obvious question arises here regarding how or why these particular thresholds were selected. Why consider mean ratings of 4.33 and higher as “high”? Why not, say, 4.00 or 4.50? It could be said that the values were selected somewhat arbitrarily. The main reason for this was the uniqueness of the expert rating form. Because the form was constructed specifically for the purposes of this thesis, no standardised guidelines were available regarding the interpretation of normative ratings. However, some consideration was given to the conceptual meanings of the ratings. For example, in the expert rating forms, a rating of 4 was deemed to mean “The item is a somewhat suitable measure of the given subscale.” For an item to be of acceptable quality for inclusion in the SOFIA, it seemed reasonable to expect that it should be rated at least a little higher than “somewhat suitable” on its reflection of the conceptual category it is purported to tap. Similarly, it seemed reasonable that an item not intended to tap a given conceptual area should be rated at least in the region of “not very suitable” (below 3.00 on the rating form) on that conceptual area. It is hoped the selection of these thresholds is clearer when the conceptual meanings of the rating values are taken into account.

inclusion in the first version of the SOFIA. I allowed these additional items to be selected because of their suitability as measures of *various* aspects of flourishing in academia. I did not reason that exclusion of items rated as being suitable measures of more than one conceptual area was necessary at this stage of the research, as the seven conceptual areas of flourishing in academia that the item pool was based upon were derived inductively and could therefore not be assumed to constitute the statistical factor structure of the emerging SOFIA.

Item selection through the process described above produced an initial version of the SOFIA containing 56 items representative of all seven of the initial conceptual areas. This 56-item version of the SOFIA was then prepared for its first administration to students.

### **4.8.3. First administration of the SOFIA**

#### **4.8.3.1. Method**

##### **4.8.3.1.1. Sample**

Sample 2<sup>39</sup> ( $N=448$ ) was recruited for the first administration of the 56-item SOFIA. The sample was composed of students at 21 higher education institutions across the UK, including 13 pre-1992 (“traditional”) universities. Students reported being enrolled on a variety of courses at both undergraduate and graduate level (e.g. psychology, sociology, architecture, dentistry, mathematics, linguistics). The sample’s age was typical of a university student sample ( $M=24.76$ ,  $SD=7.81$ ) and 79.9% were female. The majority (76.3%) of students reported being of domestic (UK) domicile status, while 12.1% were from the European Union and 11.6% were International students. Most (91.3%) students were enrolled to study full time.

##### **4.8.3.1.2. Procedure**

Participants were recruited through academic and administrative staff members at universities. I used a comprehensive list of higher education institutions in the UK taken from the website of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, 2013). Staff members at these universities were then emailed a formal request (see Appendix F for an email request template) to distribute to their students an electronic link to an online survey containing the SOFIA (see next section). Staff members were selected for emailing on the basis of either their role (e.g. staff dealing with student records or administration) or research interests relevant to the present study (e.g. positive

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<sup>39</sup> As the reader will recall, samples are numbered consecutively throughout the thesis. Sample 1 was used in Chapter Three.

psychology, higher education, psychometrics). Within any given institution, relevant staff members were located and emailed within all faculties or colleges. Appropriateness of staff members targeted for emailing was thus determined by examination of online institutional staff profiles/websites. The process of staff emailing was continued until sufficient students had received and completed the SOFIA survey to meet the sampling requirements of factor analysis.<sup>40</sup>

#### **4.8.3.1.3. Online survey**

Data collection was facilitated through an online survey constructed using the secure web-based survey platform SurveyGizmo<sup>®</sup>. Students accessed the survey by clicking on the electronic link provided in the email request forwarded to them by staff members at their university (see previous section). The first page of the survey contained information on the survey (see Appendix G for an online information sheet template) and the option for students to click to indicate their informed consent. The survey then proceeded to request students' demographic details (e.g. age, gender, domicile status). Next, the survey presented the 56-item SOFIA. Items were given in a uniform random order with the response format being on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1, "Strongly disagree," to 7, "Strongly agree." Finally, students had the option of providing their own views on the SOFIA via an open textbox at the end of the survey.

#### **4.8.3.1.4. Consideration of ethical issues**

Because the research reported in Chapter Three was carried out "in the field" using paper questionnaires, I required an amendment to the ethical approval previously obtained from the University of East London Research Ethics Committee (as appears in Appendix A). This amendment allowed me to conduct data collection electronically by means of distributing study-related information to relevant staff members at institutions other than the University of East London (see Appendix H). Also, in all studies reported in the present chapter and Chapter Five, students' email addresses were stored in a secure electronic database for the purpose of enabling them to request their data to be withdrawn from the research if they desired this. Email addresses are due to be permanently deleted from the database upon full completion of the PhD programme of which this thesis is a part.

### **4.8.4. Results**

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<sup>40</sup> Factor analysis has been argued to provide the most valid results when the variable to participant ratio is at least 1:5, though preferably closer to 1:10 or higher (e.g. Costello & Osborne, 2005). In this case, because there were 56 scale items to be factor analysed, a sample of at least 280 (56x5) was required. To ensure sampling requirements were adequately met, this number was exceeded in the final sample, which, at  $N=448$ , provides a variable to participant ratio of 1:8.

All statistical analyses reported in this chapter and Chapter Five were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0.0).

A principal components analysis (PCA; a form of factor analysis) with Promax rotation was carried out on the Sample 2 data to assess the initial factor structure of the 56-item SOFIA and to remove items with low or multiple loadings. Oblique rotation is recommended for the social sciences because, contrary to orthogonal rotation, it does not assume the emerging factors are uncorrelated with one another (Kline, 2000). Promax was the particular type of oblique rotation selected as it has been argued to be computationally fast and conceptually simple (Abdi, 2003).

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy indicated the sample size was sufficient for statistically valid extraction of factors ( $KMO=0.94$ ). Initial examination of the item loadings indicated an 11-factor solution explaining 68.5% of the scale variance. Three items were observed to have loadings below 0.4 and another four items had high (above 0.4) loadings on multiple factors. These were removed and the analysis repeated. This resulted in a 10-factor solution explaining 68.7% of the scale variance. However, a further item was found to have a loading below 0.4. Removal of this item and repetition of the analysis again produced a 10-factor solution, this time accounting for 69.6% of the scale variance. The 48 items remaining in the SOFIA were then transferred to reliability analyses.

Reliability analyses reduced the SOFIA from 48 to 31 items. Throughout item deletions, the SOFIA's internal consistency remained constant, with a Cronbach's alpha of between 0.94 and 0.95. Following item deletions, the 31-item SOFIA was entered into a PCA with Promax rotation to re-examine factor structure. The analysis yielded a 5-factor solution explaining 67.3% of the scale variance. Initial factor loadings, Cronbach's alphas for factors, and descriptive statistics appear in Table 4.4 (p. 149).

**Table 4.4. Factorial structure of the 31-item SOFIA.**

ITEM	FACTOR				
	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy the courses I am taking.	.86				
I am satisfied with my chosen course.	.86				
I don't enjoy my course.*	.83				
Studying at university makes me feel happy.	.79				
Learning about my subject matter makes me happy.	.79				
I feel happy at university.	.74				
Studying my subject matter is satisfying to me.	.71				
I don't feel happy on my course.*	.70				
While I am at university, I aim to reach my full potential.		1.01			
At university, I am trying to realise my full potential.		.94			
I am striving to reach my full potential at university.		.91			
I try to be the best I can be at my studies.		.77			
I am determined to do well in my studies.		.77			
I am committed to learning.		.62			
I want to learn as much as possible at university.		.54			
I am keen to acquire of lot of knowledge about my subject area.		.54			
I have a great deal of determination towards my studies.		.48			
I work very hard in my studies.		.45			
I often feel that my studies are going downhill.*			.82		
I feel as though I have no motivation to study.*			.81		
I can't seem to focus when I am studying.*			.79		
I am not very optimistic about my studies.*			.71		
I frequently lack enthusiasm to learn.*			.70		
I don't feel that I am making progress at university.*			.62		
I approach my academic work with a lot of motivation.			.53		
I am confident in my studies.			.48		
I don't read much about my subject matter.*				.97	
I do additional reading on my subject matter.				.90	
I read a large variety of material on my subject matter.				.84	
I don't put much effort into my exams.*					.74
I revise my subject matter extensively before exams.					.69
<i>M</i>	5.97	6.10	5.03	5.31	5.81
<i>SD</i>	.95	.79	1.16	1.29	1.02
Cronbach's alpha	.92	.92	.89	.88	.74
% Unique variance explained	42.3	10.4	5.9	4.7	4.0

\*Item is reverse-coded, hence positive loading.

The five factors emerging from the post-reliability analyses PCA were generally coherent. Factor 1 was identified as “subjective wellbeing,” which incorporated items on course-related satisfaction and enjoyment and general happiness in the university environment and in academic activities such as studying and learning. Factor 2 was conceptualised as “striving.” This factor included items on striving to reach one’s full academic potential, to be the best one can be and to learn as much as possible. Factor 3 was labelled “positive orientation to university.” Items loading onto this factor related to having a general positive attitude towards university and academic studies. This positive attitude incorporated general motivation, confidence, and enthusiasm for academic work and a “can do” approach to university. Factor 4 was named “additional study” and included items on reading a variety of academic material supplementary to the minimum required by a course or subject. Finally, Factor 5 was called “engagement with examinations” and related to putting an effort (such as revising appropriate subject matter) into exams. Although this factor included only two items, I elected to retain it I reasoned that students’ engagement with formal assessments at university is theoretically important to their potential to flourish.

To confirm the statistical coherence of the factors extracted, PCAs with Promax rotation were carried out separately for each factor’s item group. In all five instances, factors were unifactorial. Furthermore, when I attempted to extract two “sub-factors” from each factor, items did not load onto second sub-factors in a conceptually meaningful manner.

Following preliminary development, the 5-factor, 31-item SOFIA was prepared for validation. The validation studies are reported in the next section.

## **4.9. Scale validation**

Initial validation of the SOFIA was carried out with six additional studies. These assessed the SOFIA’s convergent and divergent validity, temporal stability, structural replicability, relationships with the Big Five personality traits and student consumerist attitudes, and cross-cultural validity.

### **4.9.1. Convergent validity**

#### **4.9.1.1. Method**

##### **4.9.1.1.1. Sample**

Sample 3 ( $N=134$ ) was recruited to assess the convergent validity of the SOFIA. Participants' age was typical of a university student sample ( $M=26.36$ ,  $SD=9.78$ ), and 89.6% were female. Most (87.3%) of the sample reported being enrolled on their course full time. The majority (76.9%) of students were undergraduates, while 19.4% were enrolled on taught graduate-level courses and 1.5% and 2.2% were enrolled on foundation-level and research-oriented graduate-level courses, respectively. Participants came from a variety of disciplinary areas at six higher education institutions across the UK including three post-1992 ("traditional") institutions. They were recruited via snowball sampling and completed the 31-item version of the SOFIA and convergent validity battery either on a voluntary basis or in exchange for course credit for a research participation requirement.

#### **4.9.1.1.2. Measures**

This study utilised six wellbeing-related measures to assess the SOFIA's convergent validity. The measures were selected for their coverage of a variety of the facets of flourishing in higher education that were tapped in the SOFIA and not necessarily for their focus, or lack thereof, on other theoretical conceptualisations of flourishing. This was because the SOFIA does not necessarily aim to resemble existing theory-driven measures of flourishing, but rather to assess flourishing as it is constructed by students within the domain of higher education. Thus, the measures selected were:

- The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), which is a 5-item measure of general life satisfaction;
- The Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE; Diener et al., 2010), which assesses positive and negative affect and emotional balance;
- The Grit Scale (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007), a 12-item instrument which measures perseverance and passion for long-term goals;
- The Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale (ABCS; Sander & Sanders, 2003); a 6-factor, 24-item measure of university students' confidence to successfully engage in a range of academic tasks in higher education;
- The Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS; Gagné, 2003, discussed earlier in this chapter), and
- The Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS; Robitschek, 2008), a 4-factor, 16-item instrument which assesses individuals' orientation to personal growth, change, and development.

#### **4.9.1.1.3. Procedure**

Data collection was carried out using the same procedure as described in section 4.8.3.1.2 (pp. 146-147).

#### **4.9.1.2. Results**

A Bonferroni correction was applied to the correlation matrix obtained for convergent validity testing to account for increased risk of Type I error caused by multiple comparisons (Larzelere & Mulaik, 1977). The conventional significance level (.05) was divided on the basis of 325 comparisons (see Table 4.5, p. 153) to obtain a corrected significance level of  $p=.0001$ . Although the majority of coefficients remained statistically significant even after the Bonferroni correction was applied, I elected to interpret coefficients more conservatively on the basis of their absolute values, rather than in relation to their  $p$  values (van Beuningen, personal communication, 2012). Therefore, I followed the recommendations given by Dancey and Reidy (2011) for interpreting correlation coefficients.

The SOFIA exhibited moderate correlations with a number of measures relating to wellbeing. Total mean scores on the SOFIA had moderate correlations with grit, academic confidence, and competence. Weak correlations were also observed between mean SOFIA scores and positive and negative affect and affect balance, personal growth initiative, and autonomy. Inter-correlations among mean SOFIA scores and the five SOFIA subscales, and correlations with each of the scales and relevant subscales used for convergent validity testing are summarised in Table 4.5 (p. 153).

**Table 4.5. SOFIA inter-subscale and convergent validity correlations.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1. SOFIA Mean	5.68	.77	.93	-																									
2. SOFIA SWB*	5.89	.90	.87	.79	-																								
3. SOFIA STR*	5.99	.78	.88	.90	.62	-																							
4. SOFIA PO*	5.32	1.02	.85	.89	.63	.72	-																						
5. SOFIA AS*	5.17	1.11	.79	.68	.34	.55	.56	-																					
6. SOFIA EE*	5.50	1.32	.78	.57	.14	.57	.42	.58	-																				
7. SWLS	23.11	7.11	.89	.29	.23	.21	.32	.23	.13	-																			
8. SPANE Positive affect	22.42	4.66	.90	.36	.29	.30	.38	.21	.16	.71	-																		
9. SPANE Negative affect	15.76	4.53	.81	-.32	-.25	-.22	-.43	-.10	-.09	.44	-.64	-																	
10. SPANE Affect balance	6.66	8.31	n/a	.38	.29	.29	.45	.17	.14	.64	.91	-.90	-																
11. Grit	3.51	.59	.80	.57	.29	.49	.54	.53	.51	.14	.27	-.25	.29	-															
12. PGIS Mean	4.42	.83	.93	.47	.32	.52	.36	.30	.30	.23	.32	-.23	.30	.42	-														
13. PGIS Readiness for change	4.64	.91	.85	.38	.29	.40	.30	.25	.21	.10	.15	-.17	.18	.36	.84	-													
14. PGIS Planfulness	4.51	1.01	.89	.48	.31	.49	.41	.34	.34	.23	.32	-.33	.36	.55	.88	.77	-												
15. PGIS Using resources	3.81	1.16	.77	.32	.27	.35	.23	.14	.21	.25	.27	-.11	.21	.15	.79	.48	.55	-											
16. PGIS Intentional behavior	4.72	.94	.85	.38	.21	.48	.27	.29	.24	.24	.30	-.17	.26	.38	.81	.61	.61	.51	-										
17. ABCS Mean	3.85	.69	.93	.68	.55	.59	.61	.46	.40	.34	.44	-.34	.44	.51	.47	.38	.50	.28	.42	-									
18. ABCS Studying	3.86	.79	.79	.65	.51	.56	.57	.46	.45	.32	.44	-.27	.39	.53	.41	.36	.45	.26	.35	.84	-								
19. ABCS Attending	4.41	.77	.85	.59	.47	.57	.48	.30	.45	.29	.33	-.31	.35	.44	.38	.31	.39	.25	.32	.70	.58	-							
20. ABCS Grades	3.79	.80	.80	.48	.43	.42	.46	.25	.17	.34	.35	-.26	.34	.23	.31	.30	.33	.19	.24	.77	.64	.39	-						
21. ABCS Verifying	3.08	1.24	.85	.43	.31	.32	.45	.37	.18	.18	.30	-.30	.33	.40	.35	.28	.39	.19	.34	.71	.42	.32	.37	-					
22. ABCS Understanding	4.01	.86	.77	.54	.48	.44	.46	.40	.31	.22	.31	-.24	.31	.43	.34	.26	.41	.18	.30	.84	.66	.55	.58	.54	-				
23. ABCS Clarifying	3.76	.87	.66	.49	.39	.42	.43	.41	.26	.24	.37	-.24	.33	.37	.38	.28	.39	.25	.36	.85	.64	.46	.67	.62	.71	-			
24. BPNS Autonomy	4.97	1.05	.67	.34	.28	.19	.40	.29	.16	.49	.58	-.57	.63	.39	.33	.31	.41	.19	.20	.54	.43	.39	.42	.45	.41	.44	-		
25. BPNS Competence	4.95	1.08	.73	.57	.43	.46	.61	.42	.25	.40	.44	-.42	.47	.46	.50	.39	.51	.34	.43	.63	.51	.43	.51	.50	.50	.50	.65	-	
26. BPNS Relatedness	5.37	.99	.84	.27	.18	.23	.26	.26	.16	.43	.46	-.34	.45	.26	.29	.13	.24	.28	.32	.43	.36	.34	.29	.32	.32	.40	.56	.60	-

Note: All coefficients of .31 and above significant at  $p < .0001$ . \*SWB=Subjective wellbeing STR=Striving PO=Positive orientation to university AS=Additional study EE=Engagement with examinations.

## **4.9.2. Divergent validity**

### **4.9.2.1. Method**

#### **4.9.2.1.1. Sample**

Sample 4 ( $N=112$ ) was recruited to assess the divergent validity of the SOFIA. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling from 13 higher education institutions across the UK, including six pre-1992 (“traditional”) universities, and reported being enrolled on a variety of courses. Mean participant age was 25.93 ( $SD=10.37$ ) and 69.6% were female. Of the sample, 76.8% reported being undergraduate while 13.4% were in taught graduate courses, with 2.7% and 7.1% on foundation-level and research-oriented graduate-level courses, respectively. Most (83.0%) students were of domestic (UK) domicile status, while 13.4% were from the European Union and 3.6% were International students. The majority (91.1%) were enrolled on their course full time.

#### **4.9.2.1.2. Measures**

Divergent validity was assessed across two measures of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress). Furthermore, to assess whether the SOFIA could be associated with social desirability bias, a social desirability measure was also utilised. The measures were:

- The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), a multidimensional measure of both psychological and physiological symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress;
- The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), an instrument assessing depressive symptoms (for this study, the 21-item version was used), and
- The Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale (SDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), a 33-item measure of social desirability tendency across general life domains.

#### **4.9.2.1.3. Procedure**

Data collection was carried out using the same procedure as described in section 4.8.3.1.2 (pp. 146-147).

### **4.9.2.2. Results**

Interpretations of coefficients obtained in divergent validity testing were made using the same logic applied to convergent validity testing (Dancey & Reidy, 2011; Larzelere & Mulaik, 1977; van Beuningen, personal communication, 2012). Here, the Bonferroni corrected significance level was .0009 (on the basis of 55 comparisons; see Table 4.6, p. 156).

Overall mean scores on the SOFIA were found to display moderate negative correlations with the two depression scales, CES-D and DASS-D, and weak correlations with the anxiety and stress measures (DASS-A and DASS-S), summarised in Table 4.6 (p. 156).

**Table 4.6. SOFIA inter-subscale and divergent validity correlations.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. SOFIA Mean	5.50	.77	.93	-										
2. SOFIA SWB*	5.77	1.02	.91	.77	-									
3. SOFIA STR*	5.79	.79	.87	.89	.51	-								
4. SOFIA PO*	5.07	1.03	.80	.88	.58	.73	-							
5. SOFIA AS*	5.08	1.24	.84	.54	.15	.54	.37	-						
6. SOFIA EE*	5.37	1.29	.73	.55	.31	.48	.42	.25	-					
7. CES-D	9.29	10.34	.91	-.49	-.43	-.33	-.61	-.06	-.15	-				
8. DASS Depression	6.59	8.13	.93	-.53	-.50	-.35	-.62	-.08	-.19	.92	-			
9. DASS Anxiety	11.73	9.49	.85	-.39	-.42	-.23	-.45	-.04	-.04	.77	.76	-		
10. DASS Stress	18.31	11.57	.87	-.27	-.30	-.13	-.42	.08	.04	.79	.72	.79	-	
11. SDS	17.00	5.05	.75	.19	.05	.16	.23	.13	.19	-.22	-.23	-.16	-.23	-

Note: All coefficients of .33 and above significant at  $p < .0004$ . \*SWB=Subjective wellbeing STR=Striving PO=Positive orientation to university AS=Additional study EE=Engagement with examinations.

### **4.9.3. SOFIA's relationships with Big Five personality traits and consumerist attitudes**

In addition to the studies carried out to assess the SOFIA's convergent and divergent validity, it was reasoned that an additional study examining the scale's relationships with major personality traits and student consumerist attitudes would provide additional insight into the nature of flourishing in higher education, for example in terms of the "profile" of the flourishing student. It is worthwhile to note here that student consumerist attitudes in particular was selected as a variable for exploration as a "pilot" study of sorts for the research that was carried out later (see Chapter Five).

#### **4.9.3.1. Method**

##### **4.9.3.1.1. Sample**

Sample 5 ( $N=258$ ) was recruited to explore the personality profiles and prevalence of consumerist attitudes among flourishing students as measured by the SOFIA. Data were obtained from a UK-wide sample of students from 12 higher education institutions (including 10 pre-1992/traditional institutions). Mean age for the sample was 23.58 ( $SD=6.73$ ) and 72.5% were female. The majority (76.7%) of the sample were undergraduates, although 15.1% were enrolled on taught graduate courses and 0.8% and 7.4% were on foundation-level and research-oriented graduate-level courses, respectively. Students reported being enrolled on a variety of courses and most (93.0%) were studying full time. For this study, data on ethnicity were also obtained, with 85.7% of the sample reporting being White (including White British, White Irish, and White-Other/European ethnic groups; valid  $N=257$ ). Other ethnic groups were in minority, with 2.3% Black (including Black African, Black Caribbean, and Black-Other ethnic groups), 3.1% Asian (including Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Asian Bangladeshi, and Asian-Other ethnic groups), 4.3% Mixed and 4.3% other ethnic groups.

##### **4.9.3.1.2. Measures**

Participants completed the SOFIA in addition to the following measures:

- The 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991; John, Naumann & Soto, 2008), which assesses extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness;
- The Consumerist Attitudes Towards Undergraduate Education Scale (CATUES; Fairchild, Cragge, Martin, Pescosolido, Smith, Kurz et al., 2007),

a 5-factor unstandardised measure of consumerist attitudes among undergraduate university students;<sup>41</sup>

- The Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010), and
- The Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being (QEWB; Waterman, Schwartz, Zamboanga, Ravert, Williams, Agocha et al., 2010), used to assess the SOFIA's relationship with eudaimonic wellbeing.

The FS and QEWB were included in this study to provide further exploratory insight into the SOFIA's convergent validity, as these measures had not been included in the initial convergent validity investigation.

#### **4.9.3.1.3. Procedure**

Data collection was carried out using the same procedure as described in section 4.8.3.1.2 (pp. 146-147).

#### **4.9.3.2. Results**

Correlation coefficients were treated in the same manner as described for convergent validity testing (Dancey & Reidy, 2011; Larzelere & Mulaik, 1977; van Beuningen, personal communication, 2012). On the basis of 171 comparisons (see Table 4.7, p. 159), the adjusted significance level was  $p=.0003$ .

Overall, examination of correlation coefficients between the SOFIA and Big Five personality traits suggested most associations were weak. However, the trait of conscientiousness appeared to be an exception to this, exhibiting moderate correlations with a number of SOFIA subscales. The SOFIA also showed moderate correlations with the two wellbeing scales. Finally, although correlations with consumerist attitudes were generally weak, there appeared to be two exceptions. These were the grade emphasis subscale on the CATUES with SOFIA's *additional study* subscale and student responsibilities with SOFIA's *striving*.

Descriptives for the scales and correlation coefficients are presented in Table 4.7 (p. 159).

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<sup>41</sup> The CATUES is not currently available in the public domain. Because this scale was also used in the research reported in Chapter Five and will be discussed at some length there, I have included it for the reader's reference in Appendix I (used with written permission from Dr Emily Fairchild).

**Table 4.7. SOFIA's relationships with personality traits and consumerist attitudes.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. SOFIA Mean	5.32	.84	.94	-																		
2. SOFIA SWB*	5.70	1.07	.93	.69	-																	
3. SOFIA STR*	5.55	.79	.93	.82	.52	-																
4. SOFIA PO*	4.74	1.21	.73	.82	.65	.61	-															
5. SOFIA AS*	5.09	1.38	.87	.70	.27	.47	.41	-														
6. SOFIA EE*	5.53	1.30	.76	.68	.21	.56	.40	.31	-													
7. BFI Extraversion	43.83	8.59	.89	.13	.18	.14	.14	-.001	.07	-												
8. BFI Agreeableness	54.44	10.85	.77	.22	.24	.25	.17	.04	.17	.33	-											
9. BFI Conscientiousness	3.25	.93	.85	.55	.25	.53	.50	.34	.42	.06	.26	-										
10. BFI Neuroticism	3.83	.65	.86	.14	-.24	-.04	-.29	.06	-.03	-.34	-.32	-.19	-									
11. BFI Openness to experience	3.58	.75	.79	.14	.12	.13	.13	.23	-.07	.19	.07	-.04	.01	-								
12. FS (Psychosocial prosperity)	3.13	.88	.92	.35	.35	.38	.42	.08	.15	.14	.17	.50	-.29	.13	-							
13. QEWB (Eudaimonic wellbeing)	3.67	.63	.86	.51	.41	.51	.52	.29	.24	-.001	.04	.34	.06	.23	.58	-						
14. CATUES Mean	3.75	.50	.73	-.21	-.23	-.08	-.20	-.23	-.004	.002	.06	.07	-.03	-.24	.04	-.07	-					
15. CATUES Consumerist orientation	3.05	1.14	.73	-.04	-.15	.02	-.09	-.01	.09	-.03	.01	.01	-.02	-.11	.003	-.06	.71	-				
16. CATUES Grade emphasis	2.16	.84	.58	-.31	-.22	-.22	-.24	-.31	-.15	-.07	.04	-.09	-.04	-.15	-.05	-.15	.65	.32	-			
17. CATUES Expectations of instructors	5.78	.71	.51	.02	.01	.12	-.04	-.04	.07	.17	.21	.18	-.05	-.08	.20	.12	.51	.19	.06	-		
18. CATUES Job performance	5.49	.90	.65	.08	-.04	.22	.01	-.07	.23	.05	.08	.33	.03	-.29	.13	.10	.66	.30	.25	.48	-	
19. CATUES Student responsibilities	2.27	.81	.44	-.38	-.22	-.42	-.23	-.26	-.29	-.08	-.11	-.24	-.01	-.06	-.15	-.19	.24	-.06	.19	-.18	-.19	-

Note: All coefficients of .22 and above significant at  $p < .0003$ . \*SWB=Subjective wellbeing STR=Striving PO=Positive orientation to university AS=Additional study EE=Engagement with examinations.

#### 4.9.4. Temporal stability

##### 4.9.4.1. Method

###### 4.9.4.1.1. Sample

Sample 6 ( $N=31$ ) was composed of a part time Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) cohort at the University of East London. Of the 16 participants who provided age data, mean age was somewhat older than typical student samples ( $M=36.75$ ;  $SD=8.00$ ). The majority (80.6%) of the sample were female.

###### 4.9.4.1.2. Practical arrangements and procedure

Temporal stability of the SOFIA was assessed for a 4-week period. The length of this interval was based primarily on convenience as the MAPP cohort constituting the sample was accessible for data collection in classes held four weeks apart. The SOFIA was administered to students in class by Dr Kate Hefferon and was re-administered four weeks later. An important consideration in the timing of the data collection process is that the students had a coursework submission deadline shortly before the first administration and were due to receive their grades shortly before the second administration. However, this was not reasoned to be likely to have a significant impact upon the results of the study as the coursework was of a regular nature rather than a large-scale or long-term project.

##### 4.9.4.2. Results

A Bonferroni correction was not applied to the data in this instance as the number of comparisons was small (six) relative to those dealt with in previous SOFIA studies. Four-week temporal stability for the overall SOFIA was moderate. Individual subscales differed somewhat, with the subjective wellbeing and striving subscales exhibiting somewhat weak correlations and the positive orientation to university, additional study, and engagement with examinations subscales exhibiting moderate correlations between the two administrations. Descriptives and correlation coefficients are presented in Table 4.8 below.

**Table 4.8. SOFIA's temporal stability.**

	$M_{t1}$	$SD_{t1}$	$\alpha_{t1}$	$M_{t2}$	$SD_{t2}$	$\alpha_{t2}$	$r_{temp}$	$p$
SOFIA Mean	5.85	.70	.91	5.56	1.10	.96	.46	.01
SOFIA SWB	6.50	.53	.86	6.23	1.19	.97	.33	.07
SOFIA STR	5.78	.57	.88	5.46	1.03	.95	.39	.03
SOFIA PO	5.78	.94	.73	5.38	1.23	.67	.63	.001
SOFIA AS	5.75	1.05	.87	5.54	1.48	.90	.57	.001
SOFIA EE	5.45	1.50	.60	5.21	1.55	.78	.44	.01

Note:  $t1$ =Time 1,  $t2$ =Time 2,  $r_{temp}$ =correlation coefficient for Times 1 and 2 over 4-week interval.

## **4.9.5. Factorial replicability**

### **4.9.5.1. Theoretical considerations**

The study on factorial replicability concerned investigating whether the 5-factor structure observed in the data from the first administration of the SOFIA could be replicated in an independent sample. Normally, such an exercise would require the use of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), a form of factor analysis in which a pre-existing factorial model is imposed on a data set to assess the degree to which it “fits” the data (Harrington, 2009). However, rather than use a CFA, an exploratory PCA – the same as that used in the first administration of the SOFIA – was favoured here. The reason for this was theoretical as opposed to statistical. The function of CFA is to assess how well a given model (e.g. one derived from theory or from another data set) fits the given data. Since this model must be known (or hypothesised) *a priori*, CFA is inherently top-down/theory-driven in nature (hence “confirmatory” in its name). This was reasoned to be antithetical to the general inductive approach adopted in the present thesis.

Within this phase of the research, and as I will later argue in the Discussion section of this chapter, one cannot assume a single “correct” (or even hypothesised) model *should* fit all data sets. This does not necessarily mean that such a model *cannot* fit multiple data sets – it may, but if the inductive, exploratory approach used in this thesis is to be adhered to then it follows that the statistical methods used to investigate the SOFIA should be exploratory rather than confirmatory. In other words, when I adopted an inductive approach, I was interested to see what other factorial structures/models might appear in the SOFIA in independent data sets, if indeed such others were possible, rather than to know whether or not a single model fitted the data sets. This appeared to render exploratory PCA more appropriate than CFA for conducting further factorial explorations of the SOFIA.

### **4.9.5.2. Sample**

Replicability of the SOFIA’s internal consistency reliability and factor structure was evaluated through analysis of data from an independent composite sample. Thus, Sample 7 was created by merging SOFIA data obtained from Samples 3, 4, and 5 and the first administration of Sample 6 (total  $N=535$ ). The mean age of this sample was 25.21 ( $SD=8.81$ , valid  $N=520$ ) and 76.6% were female.

### **4.9.5.3. Results**

An exploratory PCA with Promax rotation was performed to assess the replicability of the 5-factor structure obtained with Sample 2. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy indicated a sufficient sample size (.94). A 5-factor solution was extracted which

accounted for 62.4% of scale variance. Twenty-seven of the 31 scale items loaded strongly onto the same factors extracted in Sample 2 (Table 4.4, p. 149). The items “I have a great deal of determination towards my studies” and “I am committed to learning” (previously loading onto the *striving* subscale) and “I don’t feel that I am making progress at university” (previously loading onto *positive orientation to higher education*) did not load onto any factor at .40 or above. Also, the item “I work very hard in my studies” (previously loading onto *striving* at .45) in this instance loaded onto *engagement with examinations* at .43. Thus, the SOFIA’s 5-factor structure was largely replicated independently of a confirmatory factor extraction method, with the exception of three items which failed to load onto any factor at .40 or above and one item which loaded onto a different factor from that observed in Sample 2.

#### **4.9.6. Cross-cultural explorations**

##### **4.9.6.1. Rationale**

All studies reported thus far in this chapter were conducted on samples obtained from universities within the UK. This study was conducted to explore the SOFIA’s convergent and divergent validity, internal consistency reliability, and factorial structure in a cultural setting different from the one in which it was developed. Here, I will report a study of cross-cultural exploration of the SOFIA within a sample of students from Australia and New Zealand. These countries were selected for three reasons. Firstly, the higher education systems in these countries have both commonalities with and differences from the UK system (e.g. similar organisational structure, but different academic culture, etc.). Secondly, institutions in Australia and New Zealand use primarily English language instruction, which eliminated the need to translate the SOFIA at such an early stage in its development. Finally, my familiarity with the education system and culture in Australia provided ease/convenience in data collection, for example through personal affiliation with numerous staff contacts at some institutions.

##### **4.9.6.2. Method**

###### **4.9.6.2.1. Sample**

Sample 8 ( $N=244$ ) was obtained to assess the SOFIA’s psychometric properties in Australia and New Zealand.<sup>42</sup> Students in Australia and New Zealand were approximately equally represented in the sample (53.3% and 46.7% respectively). Mean

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<sup>42</sup> No significant differences emerged between the data obtained in Australia and in New Zealand. Therefore, the two samples were merged and analyses are presented for both countries as a whole.

age of the sample was a little older than typical student samples ( $M=28.8$ ;  $SD=10.89$ ). Of the sample, 75.0% were female, 95.5% were of domestic domicile status in their country of study (with the remainder being of International domicile status), and 80.3% were studying full time. Also, 53.3% of the sample reported being enrolled on a Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) course, and 59.8% were undergraduates (with the remainder being postgraduates).

#### **4.9.6.2.2. Measures**

A variety of measures were administered to the sample to assess the SOFIA's convergent and divergent validity and its relationships with personality traits and consumerist attitudes. In addition to these, relationships with two political measures – of leftism and libertarianism – were also assessed. The measures for convergent validity:

- The SOFIA;
- The Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Wellbeing (QEWB; Waterman et al., 2010);
- The Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010);
- The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985);
- The Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE; Diener et al., 2010);
- The Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale (ACS; Sander & Sanders, 2003);
- The Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS; Gagné, 2003);
- The Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS; Robitschek, 2008).

For divergent validity:

- The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977);
- The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

For relationships with other variables:

- The Consumerist Attitudes Toward Undergraduate Education Scale (CATUES; Fairchild et al., 2007);
- The Big Five Inventory (BFI; John et al., 1991; John et al., 2008);
- A measure of political left wing/right wing ideology (Evans, Heath & Lalljee, 1996). This scale contains five items relating to traditional ideological stances, such as concern for equal distribution of wealth. Responses are via a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, "Strongly disagree," to 5, "Strongly agree." A high score is assumed to imply a left-wing stance, while a low score is assumed to imply a right-wing stance;

- A measure of political libertarianism/authoritarianism (Evans et al., 1996). This scale contains 10 items relating to traditionally libertarian ideologies, such as freedom of speech or obedience to authority. Respondents use the same 5-point Likert scale as mentioned above. The scale includes three reverse-coded items. High scores are assumed to indicate higher libertarianism, while low scores are assumed to indicate higher authoritarianism.

#### **4.9.6.2.3. Procedure**

Data collection was carried out using the same procedure as described in section 4.8.3.1.2 (pp. 146-147). However, in this case, institutions were approached using the lists available in the respective countries (Study in Australia, 2013; Universities New Zealand, 2013).

#### **4.9.6.3. Results**

Results are presented in four sections. First, I will report the results of the factorial analysis. Next, I will show results for convergent and divergent validity. Finally, I will report results for the SOFIA's relationships with other variables. Results for the SOFIA's internal consistency reliability appear within the convergent validity section (Table 4.9, pp. 166-167).

##### **4.9.6.3.1. Factorial structure**

As with previous explorations of factorial structure, this study employed an exploratory PCA with Promax rotation (Abdi, 2003). A 5-factor solution was extracted accounting for 65.7% of variance in the data. Thirty of the SOFIA's 31 items loaded clearly onto the same factors as were observed with Sample 2, with loadings of 0.49 and above. However, the item "I don't enjoy my course," which previously loaded onto the subjective wellbeing factor, did not load at 0.4 or above onto any factor in the present data.

##### **4.9.6.3.2. Convergent validity**

A Bonferroni correction was applied on the basis of 351 comparisons, with the adjusted significance level being  $p=.0001$ . Correlation coefficients were interpreted in the same manner as in previous studies (following Dancy & Reidy, 2011; van Beuningen, personal communication, 2012).

Correlations between the SOFIA and the measures used to assess convergent validity appear to be generally similar to the correlations obtained in the original convergent validity study conducted with Sample 3 in the UK. Internal consistency reliability for some SOFIA subscales, however, was lower than observed in the previous UK samples. Descriptives for the scales and correlation coefficients for convergent

validity are summarised in Table 4.9 (p. 166-167). Internal consistency reliability for the SOFIA is also given in Table 4.9.

**Table 4.9. SOFIA's convergent validity in Australia and New Zealand.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
1.SOFIA Mean	4.83	.39	.67	-																										
2.SOFIA SWB*	5.03	.49	.62	.75	-																									
3.SOFIA STR*	4.70	.50	.71	.86	.57	-																								
4.SOFIA PO*	5.06	.52	.92	.80	.54	.57	-																							
5.SOFIA AS*	4.92	.73	.72	.66	.30	.49	.48	-																						
6.SOFIA EE*	4.17	.75	.51	.35	.03	.31	.13	.18	-																					
7.QEWB	47.2	5.83	.46	.17	.02	.17	.16	.20	.06	-																				
8.FS	44.9	6.60	.88	.18	.28	.17	.28	.03	-.19	.35	-																			
9.SWLS	24.2	6.01	.83	.13	.16	.10	.23	-.02	.00	.27	.67	-																		
10.SPANE-P	22.7	3.79	.87	.14	-.12	.14	.24	-.06	.03	.32	.65	.62	-																	
11.SPANE-N	15.2	4.36	.84	-.05	.16	-.06	-.22	.12	.05	-.09	-.48	-.47	-.57	-																
12.SPANE-B	7.49	7.23	n/a	.11	.15	.11	.26	-.10	-.02	.22	.63	.60	.87	-.90	-															
13.ACS Mean	4.07	.56	.92	.34	.44	.35	.37	.07	-.08	.05	.51	.39	.35	-.35	.39	-														
14.ACS Study	3.94	.76	.83	.23	.31	.25	.35	.02	-.13	.12	.47	.38	.34	-.37	.40	.85	-													
15.ACS Attend	4.39	.59	.79	.30	.25	.26	.33	.20	.03	.09	.31	.17	.17	-.17	.19	.60	.46	-												
16.ACS Grades	4.10	.64	.67	.21	.28	.27	.25	-.02	-.14	-.01	.38	.35	.28	-.35	.36	.79	.68	.39	-											
17.ACS Verbal	3.70	1.01	.74	.14	.27	.15	.12	.00	-.05	.002	.30	.25	.23	-.20	.24	.67	.38	.17	.38	-										
18.ACS Under	4.06	.70	.82	.39	.49	.39	.34	.13	-.02	.01	.41	.28	.29	-.24	.30	.84	.65	.52	.59	.45	-									

**Table 4.9 Cont'd.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
19.ACS Clarify	4.13	.76	.69	.34	.45	.34	.30	.06	-.01	-.003	.41	.31	.24	-.20	.25	.82	.58	.34	.60	.63	.64	-								
20.BPNS Auton	5.07	.92	.72	.12	.27	.13	.17	-.15	-.07	.05	.64	.57	.54	-.55	.62	.43	.37	.16	.35	.30	.35	.37	-							
21.BPNS Compet	5.09	.94	.71	.28	.38	.31	.36	.03	-.18	.17	.65	.48	.50	-.44	.53	.62	.51	.29	.51	.40	.54	.54	.56	-						
22.BPNS Relate	5.48	.93	.82	.15	.28	.14	.20	.01	-.19	.13	.72	.52	.50	-.37	.48	.37	.31	.30	.29	.18	.29	.30	.56	.48	-					
23.PGIS Mean	3.31	.82	.92	.22	.27	.21	.20	.12	-.04	.32	.50	.38	.37	-.27	.36	.50	.45	.32	.27	.39	.40	.39	.33	.47	.28	-				
24.PGIS Res	3.46	.93	.87	.21	.28	.18	.19	.09	.002	.27	.41	.32	.31	-.24	.30	.46	.40	.27	.24	.38	.39	.38	.29	.40	.18	.86	-			
25.PGIS Plan	3.33	.99	.88	.19	.26	.21	.18	.06	-.10	.25	.50	.40	.38	-.30	.38	.49	.48	.28	.29	.37	.39	.35	.39	.49	.28	.88	.81	-		
26.PGIS Usin	2.84	1.18	.79	.09	.13	.09	.09	.10	-.06	.22	.32	.20	.23	-.15	.21	.33	.27	.21	.17	.31	.26	.25	.19	.31	.21	.74	.42	.47	-	
27.PGIS Inten	3.62	.94	.68	.23	.23	.20	.21	.15	.02	.29	.40	.33	.30	-.20	.28	.04	.31	.28	.19	.22	.27	.28	.20	.34	.25	.78	.60	.61	.39	-

Note: All coefficients .22 and above significant at  $p < .0001$ . \*SWB=Subjective wellbeing STR=Striving PO=Positive orientation to university AS=Additional study EE=Engagement with examinations.

#### 4.9.6.3.3. *Divergent validity*

A Bonferroni correction was applied on the basis of 30 comparisons, with the adjusted significance level being  $p=.002$ . Correlation coefficients were interpreted in the same manner as in previous studies (following Dancey & Reidy, 2011; van Beuningen, personal communication, 2012).

Correlations for the SOFIA's divergent validity appear in Table 4.10 below. Overall, the SOFIA exhibited weak correlations with both depression measures and with the anxiety and stress measures. However, the *additional study* subscale appeared to have slightly higher correlations than the other subscales with all four divergent validity measures. These correlations were also positive, as opposed to negative.

**Table 4.10. SOFIA's divergent validity in Australia and New Zealand.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	CES-D	DASS-D	DASS-A	DASS-S
SOFIA Mean				.07	-.01	-.01	.03
SOFIA				-.12	-.24	-.21	-.19
SWB*							
SOFIA				.04	.03	.003	.04
STR*							
SOFIA PO*				-.05	-.01	-.08	-.11
SOFIA AS*				.30	.25	.22	.27
SOFIA EE*				.05	.05	.05	.07
CES-D	18.95	6.87	.73	-			
DASS-D	3.07	3.92	.83	.71	-		
DASS-A	3.25	3.50	.75	.68	.78	-	
DASS-S	4.31	4.63	.87	.77	.86	.81	-

Note: All coefficients .22 and above significant at  $p<.002$ . Descriptives and inter-subscale correlations for SOFIA not given here as these were reported previously (see Table 4.9). \*SWB=Subjective wellbeing STR=Striving PO=Positive orientation to university AS=Additional study EE=Engagement with examinations.

#### 4.9.6.3.4. *Relationships with consumerism, personality, and political ideologies*

The study of SOFIA's relationships with student consumerism, personality traits, and political ideologies involved 156 comparisons, for which a Bonferroni correction was applied. The adjusted significance level was  $p=.0003$ . Correlation coefficients were interpreted in the same manner as in previous studies (following Dancey & Reidy, 2011; van Beuningen, personal communication, 2012).

Results appear in Table 4.11 (p. 170). Correlations with student consumerist attitudes generally mirrored those found in the UK sample earlier, with grade emphasis and student responsibilities dimensions in particular showing modest but notable associations. With the Big Five traits, correlation patterns again mirrored the UK

sample, though in this case the coefficients associated with conscientiousness were a little lower than those observed with the UK sample. Finally, no noteworthy associations were apparent between the SOFIA and the measures of political leftism and libertarianism.

**Table 4.11. SOFIA's relationships with personality/attitudes in Australia and New Zealand.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. SOFIA Mean				-.23	-.19	-.25	.12	-.02	-.20	.09	.10	.20	.07	.21	.07	.06
2. SOFIA SWB*				-.28	-.22	-.27	.12	-.05	-.22	.10	.17	.31	-.06	.25	.003	.20
3. SOFIA STR*				-.19	-.15	-.20	.08	-.03	-.15	.14	.09	.20	.008	.18	.04	.006
4. SOFIA PO*				-.22	-.11	-.23	.07	-.01	-.27	.09	.14	.27	-.006	.16	.02	-.07
5. SOFIA AS *				-.09	-.09	-.16	.21	.05	-.15	.02	.008	.05	.21	.09	.13	.02
6. SOFIA EE*				-.03	-.09	-.02	-.06	.001	.11	.10	-.06	-.16	.08	.02	.09	-.02
7. CATUES Mean	3.80	.49	.68	-												
8. CATUES Consumerist orient	3.21	1.22	.74	.62	-											
9. CATUES Grade emphasis	2.15	.96	.66	.56	.14	-										
10. CATUES Expectations of ins	5.87	.72	.60	.44	.01	-.04	-									
11. CATUES Job performance	5.44	.91	.58	.61	.16	.13	.49	-								
12. CATUES Student respons	2.33	.90	.55	.34	-.05	.19	-.16	-.09	-							
13. BFI Extraversion	3.01	.68	.71	.03	.05	.001	.20	.02	-.15	-						
14. BFI Agreeableness	3.81	.57	.74	.03	-.03	-.03	.16	.14	-.14	.16	-					
15. BFI Conscientious	3.65	.70	.84	-.09	-.06	-.09	.18	.03	-.25	.28	.31	-				
16. BFI Neuroticism	3.15	.71	.77	-.06	-.02	.001	.05	.10	.04	-.08	-.26	-.31	-			
17. BFI Openness	3.70	.58	.78	-.09	-.07	-.12	.07	-.02	-.06	.19	.10	.12	-.13	-		
18. Leftism	16.82	3.81	.79	.07	-.05	.05	.17	.08	-.02	-.02	.03	-.04	.12	.003	-	
19. Libertarianism	33.94	5.89	.77	.18	-.17	-.11	-.05	-.19	.09	.004	-.008	-.07	-.04	.21	.24	-

Note: All coefficients .22 and above significant at  $p < .0003$ . Descriptives and inter-subscale correlations for SOFIA not given here as these were reported previously (see Table 4.9). \*SWB=Subjective wellbeing STR=Striving PO=Positive orientation to university AS=Additional study EE=Engagement with examinations.

## **4.10. Discussion**

### **4.10.1. Overview**

In this chapter, I aimed to develop and present initial evidence for the validity and reliability of a psychometric measure of flourishing in higher education. The resultant Scale of Flourishing in Academia (SOFIA; see Appendix J) was developed on the basis of conceptual areas of “flourishing in higher education” derived from the data-driven (inductive) understandings from students discussed in Chapter Three. The validation studies carried out in the UK, Australia and New Zealand suggest the SOFIA possesses initially promising psychometric properties and could be developed further as a measurement tool complementary to those already in use within positive education. In this section, I will first discuss the issues arising from the development of the SOFIA and consider the scale’s psychometric quality. Next, I will consider the strengths and limitations of the research presented in this chapter, followed by its implications for theory and practice in positive psychology and education. I will conclude the section, and chapter, by situating the present studies within the context of the thesis.

### **4.10.2. Issues arising from scale development**

One possible question arising from the development phase of the SOFIA research concerns the apparent incongruence between the conceptual areas used as a framework for item generation and the mathematically derived factor (subscales) that were later extracted from the scale. This question requires some consideration.

There is some discrepancy between the conceptual areas used for item generation and the factors representing the SOFIA’s subscales, however I would argue that both sets of conceptualisations are valid. Items generated from two of the original conceptual areas, *social engagement* and *success*, did not appear in the final version of the scale because of elimination either during the expert rating exercise or through item analysis. The other items generally formed factors not directly corresponding to the remaining five conceptual areas in which they were generated. For example, the *striving* factor emerged as a combination of items from the *self-actualisation and progress* and *commitment to learning* conceptual areas, while items from the *academic engagement* conceptual areas were generally delineated into the *additional study* and *engagement with examinations* factors. Items in the *subjective wellbeing* conceptual area, though, remained in a coherent group to form the *subjective wellbeing* factor.

While the themes emerging from inductive or constructivist studies of wellbeing (e.g. Chapter Three; Lu & Shih, 1997) possess conceptual significance, as derived from

personal or cultural constructions of wellbeing, psychometric measurement of wellbeing also requires *statistical* significance, in terms of both internal consistency reliability and factorial coherence of the scale (Kline, 1998, 2000; Rust & Golombok, 1999). Thus, although some items in the original pool (e.g. from the *social engagement* conceptual area) possessed conceptual significance as dimensions of flourishing in higher education, they failed to demonstrate an adequate statistical relationship with items in other factors and with the scale as a whole. Therefore, the construction of the SOFIA from items exhibiting both conceptual and statistical significance for flourishing in academia was essential to maintain a psychometrically reliable instrument addressing the concepts the scale purports to measure. On the other hand, the exclusion of conceptually significant items that failed to merge statistically with the scale as a whole was necessary to ensure the adequacy of the SOFIA's psychometric properties (Kline, 1998, 2000).

My point here is that the conceptual significance of an item is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for inclusion in a psychometric scale – it also requires an acceptable degree of statistical significance (for example, association with other items to form a coherent whole). However, at the same time, I do not assert that excluded items are not important to flourishing in higher education – rather that their importance is more conceptual than statistical, and therefore such items may be better assessed in ways other than psychometric.

#### **4.10.3. Assessing the SOFIA's psychometric quality**

I outlined some of the indicators of quality in psychometrics earlier in this chapter. Here, I will return to these to consider how the psychometric quality of the SOFIA may be evaluated. I will begin with cross-cultural validity.

##### **4.10.3.1. Cross-cultural validity**

The process by which items were retained in the SOFIA (on the basis of both conceptual and statistical significance) resulted in the emergence of a particular portrayal, or ideation, of flourishing in higher education constituted by the SOFIA's five subscales. This ideation highlights the importance to the construct of 'flourishing in academia' of each of the scale's five factors, as constructed by students, in the domain of academia and in the culture of higher education (cf. Christopher, 1999). Therefore, although the SOFIA may be developed further as a measure of flourishing in academia, it is essential to acknowledge that it is bound to both the domain of academia and, to some extent, to the culture of higher education in the UK. Exploration of the SOFIA's psychometric properties in Australia and New Zealand contributed to the assessment of

the SOFIA's cross-cultural validity (Swanepoel & Krüger, 2011), i.e. how the SOFIA "behaves" in samples from settings other than the one in which it was developed. Aspects of the SOFIA, such as factorial structure and patterns of correlations with wellbeing measures, personality traits and consumerist attitudes, were generally consistent between the UK and Australia/New Zealand samples, indicating students in Australia and New Zealand do not appear to respond to either the overall SOFIA or the other measures used in a manner that differs a great deal from the manner students in the UK do so. However, within individual subscales of the SOFIA, students in Australia and New Zealand appeared to respond to items less consistently than do students in the UK, which led to the generally lower internal consistency reliability in the SOFIA subscales in the Australia/New Zealand sample, though the positive orientation to university subscale was an exception to this. This inconsistency suggests students in Australia and New Zealand may not find the items contained in each of the SOFIA's other four subscales as internally coherent in a conceptual sense as do students in the UK. However, further interpretation of this would require additional studies in Australia and New Zealand to assess whether the inconsistency is replicated.

One point that requires acknowledgement in relation to cross-cultural exploration of the SOFIA is that I do not intend for the scale to be "context-free" or "culture-free." Intending this would contradict the main argument of this thesis that flourishing is both context-specific and culturally constructed (cf. Christopher, 1999; Constantine & Sue, 2006; Henderson, Sampson, Mayes & Oakley, 1992), and also the main argument of this chapter that it should be measured as such. However, this should not imply that the SOFIA should not be investigated in higher education settings other than the UK. Rather, I would argue that the scale should be explored in diverse cultural settings, but with the aim of adapting it to be contextually relevant to students in those settings as opposed to seeking some form of psychometric universality. In a sense, then, I am advocating the use of the relational ontological perspective (Slife & Richardson, 2008) that underpins the SOFIA, rather than necessarily the SOFIA itself.

#### **4.10.3.2. Internal consistency reliability**

Internal consistencies of the subscales were generally high (though higher in the UK than in Australia and New Zealand), indicating encouraging evidence that the items converge in their measurement of facets of the same construct (Kline, 1998, 2000). I noted earlier in this chapter the argument that excessively high internal consistency reliability values may be indicative of redundant items (and therefore compromised validity) within a scale, for example in the form of multiple items which are

paraphrased versions of one another (e.g. Cattell & Kline, 1977). Examination of the 31 items appearing in the “final” version of the SOFIA may suggest that some of these (e.g. within the *additional study* or *engagement with examinations* subscales) do resemble one another in terms of wording and in this sense Cattell and Kline’s argument may be applicable. However, in defending the overall scale, I would argue that the scale is a valid measure of flourishing in higher education by appealing to its “face value.” According to the principle of face validity, a scale may be regarded as valid if its items can be reasoned to be logical indicators of the concept it purports to measure (Mosier, 1947; Nevo, 1985). Following this, although some items in the SOFIA may resemble one another, overall there appears to be reasonable variation in items, and therefore diversity in the range of facets of flourishing in higher education that the SOFIA addresses.

#### **4.10.3.3. Factorial structure**

The initial exploratory PCA conducted on the SOFIA revealed a 5-factor structure of the scale, including *subjective wellbeing*, *striving*, *positive orientation to university*, *additional study*, and *engagement with examinations*. This structure was largely replicated in an independent UK sample and in Australia and New Zealand, suggesting that the factors are robust in the samples examined. However, since the SOFIA’s factorial structure was assessed using samples with a limited range of demographic characteristics (e.g. predominantly female, domestic, full time, undergraduate students), further studies are required to determine whether the 5-factor structure is applicable to more demographically diverse groups of students, or instead whether a different factorial structure may apply to these groups.

#### **4.10.3.4. Construct validity**

The SOFIA appeared to exhibit stronger correlations with particular wellbeing measures (e.g. grit, academic confidence, personal growth initiative, competence) as opposed to others (e.g. life satisfaction, affect, autonomy, relatedness). This appears to suggest flourishing in higher education may have a closer relationship with ability- and attainment-related forms of wellbeing than with hedonia or forms of wellbeing not directly relating to ability or attainment, such as relatedness or autonomy. This relationship may suggest that to flourish at university has an emphasis on factors such as perseverance, goal achievement, a sense of academic ability, confidence in engaging in academic work, and self-development, while other factors, such as hedonic wellbeing, may be less emphasised. In other words, flourishing in higher education, as it is measured by the SOFIA, appears to have some characteristics that differentiate it

from flourishing in other life domains (e.g. marriage or social relationships, which emphasise positivity, Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) and from general wellbeing (e.g. Seligman, 2011). Although the relationships between student wellbeing and ability- and attainment-related factors have been examined in some depth (e.g. Topham & Moller, 2010; Van Petegem et al., 2008), the majority of this work has been correlational and non-comparative, meaning little is known about whether these factors are predictive of wellbeing over and above other wellbeing factors such as life satisfaction or positive affect. Also, these studies have found somewhat contradictory relationships between ability/attainment and wellbeing (cf. Topham & Moller, 2010). Both of these issues may be addressed by future research in order to shed more light on the notion of context-specificity in flourishing. This may lead to a clearer conceptual understanding of the dimensions of flourishing in higher education, their relative importance, and overall greater construct validity.

#### **4.10.3.5. Temporal stability**

The SOFIA exhibited moderate temporal stability in a part-time postgraduate positive psychology class over a four-week period, indicating flourishing in higher education may be a characteristic somewhat changeable over time. This diverges from what has been observed with other measures of flourishing such as Keyes' (2002) Mental Health Continuum battery, which has been shown to exhibit somewhat higher stability over a four-week period (ranging from .57 to .71; see Robitschek & Keyes, 2009). This may indicate some difference in temporal stability between generic and context-specific flourishing and/or between different conceptualisations of flourishing. However, because the sample used in the present study was somewhat atypical of the wider student population (e.g. postgraduate, more knowledgeable about positive psychology), a clearer picture of the SOFIA's temporal stability may be gained if the study were repeated with, for example, undergraduates or students in other disciplinary areas.

#### **4.10.3.6. Relationships with personality traits and consumerist attitudes**

My attempt to profile the flourishing student (as assessed by the SOFIA) on personality and consumerist attitude measures offers a number of suggestions towards developing a theoretical model of flourishing in academia. No clear relationships emerged between the SOFIA and extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, or openness to experience. However, correlations with conscientiousness were notable in comparison to these, suggesting high scorers on the SOFIA also tend to have higher conscientiousness in comparison to low scorers.

Previous research on conscientiousness identifies generally consistent relationships with wellbeing facets that may help link it to facets of flourishing assessed by the SOFIA. For example, conscientiousness has been consistently associated with subjective wellbeing (e.g. Brajša-Žganec, Ivanović & Lipovčan, 2011; Hayes & Joseph, 2003; Malkoç, 2011), psychological wellbeing (e.g. Grant, Langan-Fox & Anglim, 2009), academic performance (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2008; Nofle & Robins, 2007), and positive attitudes towards effortful and responsible academic study and job performance (Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds & Meints, 2009). These findings appear to relate to items in the SOFIA addressing ability- and attainment-related forms of wellbeing, particularly in subscales that correlated more strongly with conscientiousness (striving and positive orientation to university). Conscientiousness may therefore be explored further by future research towards developing a theoretical model of flourishing in higher education which identifies the personality and educational variables that may predict flourishing in a higher education context.

Profiling of the consumerist attitude of flourishers produced a less clear picture, with SOFIA-CATUES correlations on consumerist orientation, expectations of instructors, and job preparation/performance exhibiting generally low correlations with flourishing. Slightly higher correlations observed in the grade emphasis and student responsibilities subscales may merit further exploration in their predictive power over the SOFIA, though. Also, because existing empirical research on student consumerist attitudes is scant (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002), little is known about their relationship with flourishing in academia, particularly in non-US settings, so exploration of the consumerism-flourishing link may be another avenue to be addressed in future. Such exploration should also address the psychometric validation of the CATUES, which is currently unstandardised but represents a useful tool for further elucidating components of the consumerism-flourishing relationship (Fairchild et al., 2007).

#### **4.10.4. Strengths and limitations**

A few issues need mentioning with regard to the strengths and limitations of this research.

Firstly, the various studies conducted to assess the SOFIA's reliability and validity utilised correlational and cross-sectional designs (Wood & Brink, 1998). Although, as I noted earlier in this Discussion section, these studies were useful in providing insight into some aspects of the SOFIA's reliability and validity, use of other approaches to scale (and construct) validation in the future would be useful as these can supplement designs that rely on self-report. For example, Campbell and Fiske (1959)

advocate a multi-trait/multi-method approach to scale validation in which the same concept or characteristic is assessed in multiple ways other than self-report (e.g. acquaintance ratings, behavioural assessments, physiological measures), and these are then correlated to assess the degree of convergence with the self-report measure in question. Also, as I noted earlier in this chapter, the aspects of validity assessed in the present studies are not exhaustive indicators of construct validity. Other aspects of construct validity, such as predictive or criterion-related validity, could be assessed in future research to determine whether students' SOFIA scores may predict their achievement (e.g. grades), retention (e.g. graduation) success (e.g. employment) or other valued educational outcomes.

A strength of the SOFIA is its context-specificity and focus on constructed flourishing – in other words, that it is derived from data-driven rather than theory-driven understandings of flourishing. This distinguishes it from existing psychometric measures of flourishing which were generally developed from theory (e.g. Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002, 2009a), and from inductively-derived measures that focus on wellbeing in schools (e.g. Engels et al., 2004). Thus, the SOFIA appears to be the first psychometric tool developed from context-specific, inductively-derived understandings of flourishing, and the first to be applied to higher education. I will explain the advantages of this distinction in the next section.

#### **4.10.5. Implications for theory and practice**

With further development, the SOFIA may be utilised in the implementation of university-based positive education programmes and research in the future. As I mentioned in the previous section, the SOFIA is different from existing measures of flourishing in that it assesses constructed rather than theorised flourishing and does so in a manner specific to the context of higher education. This puts the scale in a favourable position to assess the context-level subjective aspects of flourishing which extant measures are unable to assess. A simple example may clarify this. If I were to offer you some tea, you might accept since I made the offer and since you may not be particularly opposed to drinking tea at this time. However, your acceptance of my offer would not necessarily mean you particularly enjoy tea. If you had been alone and left to your own devices, the thought of drinking tea at this time may well not have occurred to you, or you may have thought of drinking a more favoured beverage, such as coffee, instead. In the case of measuring flourishing, existing measures derived from theory assess aspects or dimensions of flourishing that are proposed by that theory (akin to the tea I offered you). Although individuals may be willing to portray themselves as flourishing by

responding appropriately to such measures, this does not necessarily mean the dimensions of flourishing assessed by those measures are meaningful to the individuals (or, just because you are happy to comply with drinking tea, does not mean you would choose it yourself). The SOFIA provides an alternative to existing measures by assessing what individuals in a given context themselves specify is important for flourishing (i.e., the coffee).

Although university-level positive education programmes are still in their infancy (e.g. Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009) relative to school-based initiatives (e.g. Green et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2009), recent literature suggests this field will be expanding in the future (Parks, 2011). As positive education initiatives aim to cultivate flourishing students within educational settings, a measure of flourishing that focuses on the concept's context-specific, constructed nature could be a useful means to assessing programme effectiveness or conducting other research relating to student wellbeing in higher education settings.

#### **4.10.6. Situating these studies within the thesis**

The studies presented in this chapter aimed to contribute to addressing the issue of contextless measurement in positive psychology, the second aspect of contextlessness emerging from abstractionist ontological perspectives on positive psychology. Whilst I would not claim the development of the SOFIA can be sufficient in countering this problem altogether, the scale does have a range of strengths that differentiate it from extant measures and give it the capacity to complement these in applied positive education research.

The development of the SOFIA led to the question of what to do with it. At the time that the scale validation work was in its final stages, the UK higher education sector was in the process of undergoing significant economic changes, particularly in the systems in place to finance it. This led to the preparation of another piece of research in which I took the SOFIA “into the field” to examine how the wider political, economic, and cultural contexts of higher education may influence students' flourishing. I will turn to this in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF FLOURISHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING DIFFERENCES IN FLOURISHING ACROSS ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS<sup>43</sup>

### 5.1. Abstract

In this chapter, I will address the third and final dimension of contextlessness I proposed in Chapter One. This dimension concerns the relationships between flourishing and the “wider contexts” in which higher education operates. Specifically, I will focus on factors relating to macro-level political, economic, and cultural influences within the UK higher education sector, such as the imposition of tuition fees, political austerity measures, and student consumerist attitudes. Taken together, I will argue these factors are dimensions of the same wider politicoeconomic-cultural context of contemporary higher education. Given that positive psychology and positive education research has focused almost exclusively on micro-level (e.g. intra-individual, interpersonal) factors influencing flourishing, the influence of the wider politicoeconomic-cultural context merits more attention. To contribute to addressing this gap, I will present a study conducted with the first UK undergraduate cohort to be affected by the recent increase in tuition fees. This investigated disparities in flourishing as a function of students’ economic circumstances, political behaviours, and political attitudes. While actual socioeconomic circumstances and political behaviours did not make a difference to students’ flourishing, students with higher consumerist attitudes towards their education were significantly less likely to flourish than their less consumerist peers. Also, students with higher trust in government were significantly more likely to flourish than their less trusting peers, particularly when the former were less leftist. Interestingly, these disparities were also observed in the re-analysis of two existing data sets with students who were not affected by the change in policy. Results suggest students’ actual

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<sup>43</sup> The research reported in this chapter has been presented as follows:

Gokcen, N. (2012). Student consumerism in the UK: Assessing the impact of the 2012 tuition fee increases in a nationwide comparative survey. Paper presented at the *Society for Research into Higher Education Newer Researchers Conference*, Newport, Wales, 11 December.

A paper based on the research is currently in preparation as follows:

Gokcen, N., Hefferon, K., Dancey, C.P., & Attree, E.A. (in preparation). Assessing student wellbeing in relation to student consumerism, leftist and libertarian ideologies, and trust in government.

economic circumstances may not be associated with students' flourishing, while cultural attitudes such as consumerism and institutional trust do appear to have an impact. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the implications of the study, including possible applications to positive education endeavours in higher education.

## **5.2. The wider contexts of higher education**

In this chapter, I will argue that flourishing must be considered as dependent not just upon the specific domain in which it occurs (such as higher education), but also upon the “wider contexts” that domain is subject to. In this section, I will offer some discussion of what this wider context is in the case of UK higher education. I am specifically interested in what I call the “politicoeconomic-cultural context” of higher education – a context that, I will argue, is produced through the interactions between economic policies, their financial ramifications, and the cultural understandings and practices that develop with them. I will begin by considering the issue of tuition fees.

### **5.2.1. Tuition fees**

Tuition fees are a relatively recent development in the history of higher education.<sup>44</sup> As Johnstone (2005) points out, tuition fees have become globally commonplace only in the last few decades (since the 1970s). Since this time, there has been a global shift in the manner higher education sectors are funded, generally moving from state/taxpayer funding to self-funding (i.e. funding by students and/or their families). This has manifested in the form of the advent of tuition fees where none previously existed (such as the UK, in 1998) and considerable rises where they already did (such as public universities in the US in the late 1990s). The reasons for this shift are complex; among them are initiatives such as “widening participation” (HEFCE, 2013) and “equal opportunities” (Higher Education Equal Opportunities Network [HEEON], 2011). These initiatives have allowed more students to enter higher education, thus leading to a need for increased funding. Also, wider issues, such as the global economic crisis, have led to reductions in public sector service funding, including state funding earmarked for the higher education sector (Johnstone, 2005).

In the UK, tuition fees were first introduced in September 1998, when they were set at a cap of £1,000 across the whole of the UK (Galindo-Rueda, Marcenaro-Gutierrez & Vignoles, 2004). However, the devolution of national administrations in individual countries (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) since then has meant tuition fee policy is

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<sup>44</sup> However, I am mindful that the Sophists of Ancient Greece, who are known to have charged tuition fees in return for instruction on various academic subjects in the fifth century B.C., are an exception to this (Duke, 2012).

implemented somewhat differently in some parts of the UK. In England, the initial £1,000 fee cap for UK/European Union<sup>45</sup> undergraduates increased at approximately the rate of inflation until the cap was increased to £3,000 in 2004 (implemented from 2006), again increasing in line with inflation for several years. In 2009, the then Labour Party Business Secretary Peter Mandelson commissioned a review of the future of funding in higher education, which recommended, among other things, a removal of the tuition fee cap altogether, i.e. a deregulated market in tuition fees (Browne, Barber, Coyle, Eastwood, King, Naik, et al., 2010). Following this, in 2010, plans were announced to raise the tuition fee cap to £9,000 from 2012-13 (Bolton, 2012). Thus, following the earlier abolition of means-tested student grants and their replacement with income-contingent student loans, the new tuition fee policy rendered students borrowing state funds liable to repay their debts with interest upon graduation. This repayment is subject to students earning a minimum of £21,000 (Bolton, 2012).

Reactions to the new tuition fee policy have been widespread and controversial. In Scotland, the Scottish Parliament announced it would not be implementing tuition fees at all (Student Awards Agency for Scotland [SAAS], 2013), and the Welsh National Assembly elected to retain the previous cap of £3,290 (National Assembly for Wales, 2011). Thus, currently, the £9,000 tuition fee cap is only in proper implementation in England. As I mentioned in Chapter One, announcement of the new policy was associated with a series of student-led public protests, particularly in England (Vasagar et al., 2010).

The effects of charging and increasing tuition fees are not agreed upon. Some theorists argue that, given the trend of decreasing reliance of higher education sectors on state funding (Johnstone, 2005), the levying of tuition fees represents an effective means of income generation for universities (e.g. Greenaway & Haynes, 2003). However, other theorists, taking a social perspective, have demonstrated that charging increased tuition fees is associated with class-related inequalities in access to and attainment in higher education, both throughout the education system and at tertiary level (Galindo-Rueda et al., 2004).

Tuition fees represent a tangible financial change in both the operation of higher education institutions and in the socioeconomic circumstances of students, and I will return to this issue in sections 5.2.4 and 5.3. However, the wider contexts of higher education are not constituted only by economic factors. In the next section, I will

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<sup>45</sup> There is no cap on tuition fees levied to International (non-EU/non-EEA) undergraduate or postgraduate students (Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007).

consider the issue of student consumerism as a cultural aspect of higher education's wider context.

### **5.2.2. Student consumerism**

Student consumerism will be discussed in three parts. I will begin with the stance taken by universities in developing the "student as customer model." Subsequently, I will discuss student consumerism in general and then within the UK universities specifically.

#### **5.2.2.1. The "student as customer" model**

The introduction and/or increase of tuition fees in many nations has approximately coincided with many institutions adopting a "student as customer" model of marketing through which they position themselves as providers of educational products and services (e.g. Fairchild et al., 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).<sup>46</sup> This model may be argued to generally follow the characteristics of "McDonaldization" – the process of public/commercial institutions taking on the properties of fast food chains (Ritzer, 1993). Ritzer (1996) proposes four characteristics taken on by institutions that render them increasingly rational. These are:

- Efficiency: Offering and emphasising fast ways of meeting a need. For example, McDonald's offers customers a fast means of satisfying hunger without the need for shopping for ingredients, transporting groceries home, cooking, and serving food.
- Calculability: Giving the impression of value for money through quantification of commodities. For example, McDonald's sells "Quarter Pounder" and "Big Mac" burgers and "large" fries and milkshakes. Similarly, Subway sells "6 inch" sub sandwiches.
- Predictability: Standardisation of products and services to offer maximum consistency and minimum variation. In the McDonald's example, chicken McNuggets in London will be the same as chicken McNuggets in Vancouver, Shanghai, or Buenos Aires. The behaviour of restaurant staff will also be the same.
- Control: Using non-human technology and behavioural engineering to control customers in a manner profitable to the commercial institution. The use of

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<sup>46</sup> Of course, this is not to say that changes in tuition fee policy alone caused institutions to adopt such a model. Indeed, free market ideologies are argued to have entered the higher education sector in the UK well before tuition fees were introduced (see Crawford, 1991, and Olssen et al., 2004), and the actual causes of the adoption of the 'student as customer' model are likely to be broader than a simple change in funding policy, including factors such as political ideologies promoted by previous government administrations, cultural trends, and the dominance of market economics as a determining force (e.g. Neely, 2000).

queues, limited menus, or uncomfortable seats subtly encourages customers to eat quickly and leave, or to order takeaway packages, thus freeing space for more customers.

Ritzer (1996) acknowledges that the McDonaldization process has been more accelerated in some sectors than in others. The focus on research and scholarship in higher education makes it seem unlikely to be a sector that could be subject to a high degree of McDonaldization, yet I would argue the opposite may be true. Some universities have started offering undergraduate courses that are condensed into shorter-than-usual timeframes, such as the University of Buckingham's "two-year" degree (University of Buckingham, 2013). These are advertised with emphasis on the "fast-track" nature of the degree, such as pointing out students can graduate and start working and earning a salary one year before their counterparts on regular-track courses. Many universities now have "student charters" which contain standardised lists of products and services students can expect (e.g. University of East London, 2010). Student behaviour is also controlled with the use of attendance monitoring policies, designated study and social activity areas, and imposition of sanctions against non-payment of dues. Thus, there seem to be grounds for arguing universities have become at least somewhat McDonaldized over time, now viewing students more as customers than as learners or academic apprentices (Schwartzman, 1995). This "student as customer" model has received support from some scholars (e.g. Obermiller & Atwood, 2011) as being useful for incorporating students' wants into educational provision. However, the majority of commentaries are critical, arguing the model encourages students to act as consumers of educational products and services without having to take responsibility for their own learning (e.g. Acevedo, 2011; Schwartzman, 1995).

Within the implementation of institutions' "student as customer" models, students appear to have taken to their position as customers, or consumers. Thus the phenomenon known as "student consumerism" has come to light (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002).

#### **5.2.2.2. Student consumerism**

What is student consumerism? The phenomenon has not been studied closely within psychology, and instead the majority of both theoretical and empirical work on the topic has been conducted by sociologists. However, the total volume of literature on the subject of student consumerism is relatively small, with most of this being theoretical or anecdotal rather than research-oriented. Fairchild, Cragge, Pescosolido, Martin, Smith, Perry et al. (2005) note that:

in recent years, there has been a good deal of discussion among academics about the presumably rising “consumerist attitude” toward higher education among college students. Instructors complain that students are not academically engaged and that they are instead concerned with “getting their money’s worth,” at times making demands that instructors believe interfere with learning (p. 1).

Thus, student consumerism might be conceptualised in basic terms as the tendency for students to view the university as a service provider and their course, degree, and/or education as a product or service they are purchasing in exchange for tuition fees. Put differently, student consumerism may be viewed as a complex, multidimensional set of attitudes including certain expectations of how instructors must behave in relation to students, the emphasis students place on educational ends (e.g. grades, graduation) over means (e.g. learning, engagement), and whether the responsibility for ensuring students’ success rests with students or with the instructors or institution (Fairchild et al., 2005).

The majority of literature on student consumerism is from the US, where the phenomenon has been debated since the 1970s. D’Amato (1987) has commented on rampant student consumerism in law school teaching, where, he argues, excessive and unjustifiable emphasis is placed on student evaluations of instructor “performance” in teaching as the basis for decisions regarding promotion and tenure. D’Amato contends this emphasis encourages instructors to strive for popularity or “easiness” instead of challenging students to attempt to self-direct their learning. Most of the theoretical commentaries that appeared during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s adopt an anti-consumerism position, arguing that student consumerist attitudes are detrimental to learning and engagement (e.g. Delucchi & Smith, 1997a, 1997b; McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Pernal, 1977; Schwartzman, 1995). However, conversely, some have argued that instructors’ striving for popularity is helpful in redressing the “ivory tower” reputation of academia (e.g. Gernster, Semerad, Doyle & Johnson, 1994).

More recently, student consumerism has been investigated in a small number of empirical studies. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) were perhaps the first such example. Their study used a purpose-written questionnaire, developed in consultation with students, aimed at empirically measuring prevalence of consumerist attitudes by asking students to rate their agreement with a series of consumerist statements. For example, of a sample of 195 North American undergraduate sociology majors, 42.5% agreed that “if I’m paying for my college education, I’m entitled to a degree,” and 73.3% agreed that “I would take a course in which I would learn little or nothing but would receive an A” (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002, p. 103). Whilst these results are striking, it should be noted

that some of the questionnaire items used by the authors may be considered leading, and perhaps also fail to capture some of the more complex aspects of student consumerism, such as its multidimensionality.

Fairchild et al. (2007) have since built on Delucchi and Korgen's work by constructing a multidimensional scale of consumerist attitudes towards undergraduate education (see Appendix I). The scale incorporates five distinct conceptual facets/subscales (consumerist orientation, expectations of instructors, grade emphasis, job performance, and student responsibilities). Although this measure is used in the present research (Chapter Four and present chapter), it has not been standardised, and its relationships with other relevant measures (such as of instrumentalism or materialism) have not yet been explored.

There is also at least one example of qualitative research on student consumerism. White (2007) explored consumerist attitudes in a sample of students in Victoria, Australia using a qualitative thematic analysis approach. The sample was composed mainly of second- and third-year undergraduate students from a variety of subject areas, and students were interviewed individually to elicit their views on higher education. White's results suggest a considerable degree of consumerism in students' attitudes towards their experiences at university, with numerous students likening the university to a business and the student body to clients. In the data, the tendency of students to conceptualise engagement as something lecturers are responsible for cultivating, rather than as a self-directed choice on the part of the student, also appears to reveal consumerist attitudes in students.

### **5.2.2.3. Student consumerism in the UK**

UK-based literature on student consumerism is limited in both theory and systematic research. Little work, if any, exists dating from before the 2000s. This may be due to the later introduction of tuition fees and to the slower development of free market ideologies and "student as customer" marketing models relative to the US (Galindo-Rueda et al., 2004; Johnstone, 2005). Even currently, available UK literature is limited and there have been calls for more systematic research attention to the topic. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) make a case for researching student consumerism in the UK. They argue that, similar to the situation in the US, student consumerism in UK universities runs the risk of oversimplifying the student-scholar relationship and reducing it to the narrowness of the relationship between a customer and seller. Reducing the learning process to fit market frameworks is dangerous for learning and engagement, they argue, as genuine learning requires a degree of risk-taking and possibility of failure, while risk-taking and

possibility of failure are undesired factors in the framework of commodification (Jamieson & Naidoo, 2004).

Despite the relative lack of systematic research literature on student consumerism in the UK, there have been numerous theoretical/anecdotal commentaries addressing and mirroring the same concerns previously reported in the US literature. For example, Pritchard (1993) argued in a report in *The Independent* that the then new publication of student charters (see previous section) heralded a new direction for the higher education sector, but that it was difficult to define exactly what the “product” was in the commodification process. Douglas, Douglas, and Barnes (2006) argue that universities sell “service-product bundles” (p. 252; see also Sasser, Olsen & Wyckoff, 1978), or holistic, inseparable packages of goods and services, such as teaching, facilities, catering, accommodation, and feedback – an “experience” or “lifestyle,” and this may be what students are positioned as the consumers of.<sup>47</sup> Other theoretical commentaries have also appeared in the last few years. For example, Furedi (2009) argues strongly against student consumer culture. He reviews a series of case studies from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, an independent organisation founded to review student complaints in higher education. In many of these cases, Furedi argues, there is evidence of unreasonable expectations on the part of some students with regard to what their universities should be providing them.

I will return to student consumerism in section 5.2.4 when I attempt to articulate the wider context of higher education, and in section 5.3.

### **5.2.3. Political ideologies, behaviours, and trust in government**

Overarching macro-level factors such as tuition fees and student consumerist culture are not the only dimensions of the wider context of higher education. It is also important to consider individual-level factors that emerge as manifestations of, or responses to, macro-level factors. In this section, I will consider a few such individual-level factors that, I will argue, also form part of higher education’s wider context. These are, specifically, political ideologies (e.g. leftism, libertarianism), political behaviours (e.g. voting choices, participation in protest), and trust in government.

#### **5.2.3.1. Political ideologies**

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<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically, students themselves may also be positioned as the products of education. If one considers the university to be at least partially McDonaldized (Ritzer, 1996), students may be conceptualised as a type of product moving along a conveyor belt-like rational system in which they move along successive stages of a standardised education and emerge from its end stages as graduates.

Political ideologies may constitute an important aspect of the wider context of higher education in that university students are adult learners who are likely both to hold personal political views and to be affected by policies implemented by government within the higher education sector. Many political ideologies exist, with some individuals adhering strictly to particular ones while others favour different ideological stances on different issues, and others none at all. Therefore, although I will introduce left-right and libertarian-authoritarian ideologies here, caution should be taken not to over-simplify these or assume they always represent straightforward, clear-cut points of view.

#### ***5.2.3.1.1. Left-right ideologies***

Left-wing ideologies may generally be associated with concern for social and economic inequalities and the view that such inequalities are unjustified and should be abolished (Thompson, 1997). Conversely, right-wing ideologies tend to accept or support social hierarchy, or inequality among groups or classes of individuals, viewing this as a natural outcome of competition in a free market (Bobbio & Cameron, 1997). Thus, left-wing ideologies emphasise state ownership and/or state regulation of public resources (e.g. educational or healthcare institutions, public services), while in right-wing ideologies, emphasis is placed on private/commercial ownership and self-regulation of such resources with the assumption that this will increase free competition within the market. Left- and right-wing ideological perspectives also differ in their views on civil and social liberties, with left-wing perspectives viewing issues such as same-sex marriage, drug use, and abortion as matters of personal choice that cannot be subject to state-imposed legislation, while right-wing perspectives defend the need for varying degrees of state regulation on such issues in order to preserve perceived moral standards or religious traditions (Bobbio & Cameron, 1997).

Although considerably clear-cut distinctions can be made between left-and right-wing ideological perspectives at a theoretical or conceptual level, in practice distinctions are often blurred. Thus, as Lukes (2003) points out, developments in politics and social life throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have seen the divide between left and right lessen, with both governments and citizens drifting towards increasingly variable or centrist views.

#### ***5.2.3.1.2. Libertarian-authoritarian ideologies***

The central principle of libertarian ideologies is liberty (Wiggins, 1973). Libertarian perspectives generally hold that individuals should have a high degree of liberty and self-determination in matters concerning their mind, body, and personal lives.

Libertarianism also generally favours individual liberty in economic life, advocating a limited role for government in issues such as education, healthcare, and social security, which should instead be conducted non-governmentally by private or charitable organizations (Nozick, 1974; Vallentyne, Steiner & Otsuka, 2005). Overall, libertarian perspectives place emphasis on small, non-interventionist governments which should not impose legislation on individuals beyond what is reasonably necessary to protect individuals' liberty.

Conversely, authoritarian ideologies place emphasis on state authority, with such authority usually being designated to a small number of governing individuals or bodies (e.g. Duckitt, 1989). In this perspective, individual liberty receives less emphasis and instead priority is given to individuals' compliance with state-imposed authority and issues of law and order.

It should be noted that libertarianism and authoritarianism have both been argued to be divisible into left-wing and right-wing varieties, and neither is necessarily a unitary construct (e.g. Altemeyer, 1981; Eysenck, 1981; Nozick, 1974; Vallentyne et al., 2005).

I suggest that individuals holding left- or right-wing and/or libertarian or authoritarian political ideologies may experience higher education and the implementation of policies within this sector in different ways. I will return to both left-right and libertarian-authoritarian ideologies in sections 5.2.4 and 5.3.

#### **5.2.3.2. Political behaviours**

As with political ideologies, many forms of political behaviour exist, ranging from normative to unorthodox. In the present research, I was interested in two specific political behaviours: voting behaviour and political protest.

##### **5.2.3.2.1. Voting behaviour**

Voting behaviour has been of interest to political scientists for some time and has been researched extensively to establish explanations for electoral outcomes (Antunes, 2010). Antunes (2010) notes that numerous theories have been proposed to explain how individuals and groups make choices about voting (e.g. when, how, or for whom they vote, or do not vote). Such theories include sociological, psychosocial, and rational choice perspectives. However, I will not review these theories in this thesis as my objective here is not to explain voting behaviour but rather to suggest that such behaviour may be an important factor within the wider context of higher education. For example, adult students voting in any given manner in the 2010 UK General Election may experience higher education (and the various economic policies affecting this

sector) in different ways as a function of the political party for which they voted. Conversely, students who did not vote for any given reason may also experience higher education in different ways.

#### **5.2.3.2.2. *Political protest***

Marsh (1974) suggests that political protest is a form of “unorthodox” political behavior which generally signifies individuals’ dissatisfaction with conventional forms of political behaviour (e.g. voting) as an effective means of participation in political life.

Participation or desire to participate in political protest may be a pertinent factor within the wider context of higher education. As I mentioned earlier, some groups of students engaged in political protest following the announcement of the change in undergraduate tuition fees in order to express opposition to this change (Vasagar et al., 2010). These students may experience higher education differently from students who did not (wish to) engage in protest or who held no strong view regarding the issue in relation to which it was conducted.

#### **5.2.3.3. Trust in government**

Trust in government is a unique construct that is neither a unitary form of political ideology nor a form of political behaviour (though it could be argued that it may influence or be influenced by both of these). As with flourishing, the intangible nature of trust renders it a difficult concept to define and measure, and researchers are therefore often left to refer to trust generically and rely on self-report responses based upon individuals’ subjective interpretations of its meaning (e.g. Torney-Purta, Kland Richardson & Henry Barber, 2004).

Although trust has been conceptualised in various ways as a generic concept (e.g. in Erikson’s [1959] theory of psychosocial lifespan development]), trust in government refers specifically to individuals’ degree of trust in various levels and areas of government, such as national or federal government and local government. It also extends to individuals’ trust in other facets of the state such as the justice and law enforcement systems (e.g. courts, police force). Torney-Purta et al. (2004) note that trust in government differs from the generic understanding of psychosocial trust (e.g. Erikson, 1959) in that it often involves trust in groups or institutions that are not directly familiar to the individual, or in intangible entities such as government. For example, Stolle (2001) argues that the nature of trust is different at individual, community, and national levels. Similarly, Patterson (1999) refers to “affective,” “collective,” and “delegated” forms of trust, which refer respectively to the trust one has in those one is directly familiar with, those not familiar but who fulfil a particular role in society, such

as bank tellers or firefighters, and those who should warrant trust because of their position within institutions, such as politicians or ministers.

Trust in government may be another relevant factor contributing to the wider context of higher education as students' degree of trust in the current government may have a bearing on their experience of higher education and of the economic policies implemented within the sector.

I will return to trust in government in the next section and in section 5.3.

In the above sections I have introduced some of the political, economic, and cultural factors that I suggest are important to the wider context within which UK higher education currently operates. In the next section, I will argue that these factors constitute different dimensions of the same wider context.

#### **5.2.4. Tying it all together**

In considering the political, economic, and cultural contexts of higher education in the UK in the present day, I argue here that the factors discussed above – tuition fees, the “student as customer” marketing model, student consumerist attitudes, students' political ideologies and behaviours, and trust in government – may be considered inherently connected with one another in a wider politicoeconomic-cultural context. An example may clarify this. A given university student may be levied a certain tuition fee as a function of the fee policy currently being implemented. This student is also necessarily positioned as a customer in relation to the marketing strategy adopted by his or her university, and will therefore have a particular propensity for consumerist attitudes in response to this. However, being a student is merely one of many social roles this individual adopts, and the same individual may also hold or not hold particular political views and engage or not engage in particular forms of political behaviour. These activities occur within the same individual and therefore cannot practically be separated from one another. At the same time, the university within which the individual operates also takes on numerous social roles – for example, as an educational institution, a charity, a company, and an implementation ground for both government policy (such as tuition fee policy) and cultural trends (such as positioning the student as a customer).

I would argue that the “multi-role” characteristics of both students and universities, relating to both education and wider political, economic, and cultural events and trends, places higher education into a wider politicoeconomic-cultural context. Instead of higher education being merely a unique domain of the educational

system, it is instead a domain that brings together individuals fulfilling multiple educational and political roles, and itself takes on multiple educational and political roles (Neely, 2000).

Having introduced the notion of the wider politicoeconomic-cultural context of higher education, I will next bring flourishing into the discussion and consider how flourishing may be implicated in the context of the political, economic, and cultural factors I introduced in the above sections.

### **5.3. Flourishing in the wider context of higher education**

I will consider flourishing in the wider context of higher education in three parts. First, I will return briefly to the notion of relational ontology (Slife & Richardson, 2008) to argue why it is important to consider flourishing in contexts wider than higher education merely as a domain of education. Next, I will offer some possible explanations of how the political, economic, and cultural factors, as a wider context, which I introduced in previous sections, may influence students' flourishing. Finally, I will consider whether and to what degree existing positive education research has investigated flourishing in wider contexts.

#### **5.3.1. Flourishing in the wider contexts of higher education**

Why should we consider flourishing in the politicoeconomic-cultural context described above? The argument that flourishing should be considered not only in the context of higher education, but also in the wider contexts of economic policy and cultural changes, depends heavily on this thesis' overall argument that flourishing has a contextually embedded nature. As discussed in Chapter One, Slife and Richardson (2008) argue much of the mainstream literature in positive psychology abstracts wellbeing from its various contexts, making it difficult to understand the ways such contexts have a bearing upon the nature of flourishing. Thus, abstractionist approaches would not consider uniquenesses in flourishing dependent on specific contexts, or, at best, they may assume a given theoretical framework may be applied to flourishing in a context in some top-down fashion.

Here, my aim is to try to take account of some of the many contextual influences on flourishing. Although I explored what flourishing is in the context of higher education in Chapter Three and how it can be measured as such in Chapter Four, it should be acknowledged these explorations took into account only the context of higher education as a life domain, and not any of the many macro-level/broader contexts in which higher education operates. This is an important next step in the present thesis because, following my main argument that flourishing is inherently embedded in a

myriad of complex contexts, and as I have been arguing in this chapter, it would be necessary to acknowledge that higher education itself is a domain influenced by, and contributive to, the contexts in which it operates.

The same individual is at once a student, a customer, a consumer, and a political being. However, if flourishing is assumed to be an educational ideal (de Ruyter, 2004), then flourishing must also occur within this same individual. Thus, political, economic, and cultural contexts cannot reasonably be separated from one another in practice, and they may have important influences over flourishing because they are embedded within the same individual and the same, overlapping contexts of higher education.

### **5.3.2. How the wider context may implicate flourishing**

Here, I will offer some possible explanations of how flourishing may be influenced by the wider politicoeconomic-cultural context of higher education. To do this, I will draw on some evidence from economics, political science, and political psychology.

#### **5.3.2.1. Traditional and new economics**

Traditional economic theory dictates that greater wealth, savings, or profit, in general, lead to greater wellbeing, and the vast majority of national economies are still organised according to this principle today (Easterlin, 1974). Confusingly, we also know, in a colloquialism, that “money can’t buy happiness,” though paradoxically, many of us still tend not to behave accordingly (Lee, 2005). In fact, research developments in a new economics – “happiness economics,” which assumes economic policy should be developed to prioritise wellbeing rather than wealth – have suggested the links between money, attitudes related to money, and wellbeing are complex. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that increases in individuals’ income do lead to increases in their wellbeing (Helliwell, 2003), but this is only true for incomes up to about \$20,000 per annum (Layard, 2005). Also, comparing our income with the incomes of those less wealthy than us (downward comparison) contributes more to our wellbeing than comparing it with the incomes of those who are wealthier (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998; Veenhoven, 1991). It has also been found in several international studies that average national wellbeing is greatest in nations with greater economic equality (e.g. Graham & Felton, 2005; Hagerty, 2000; O’Connell, 2004; Tomes, 1986).

#### **5.3.2.2. Materialism, consumerism, tuition fees and wellbeing**

Links between economic factors and wellbeing may be found in new economic research on materialism. Materialism may be defined as the tendency to place greater emphasis on tangible material possessions or goals with the belief that they are either conducive to one’s wellbeing, or are valuable goods in their own right, as opposed to, for example,

non-tangible entities such as experiences or relationships. For example, Belk (1985) describes materialism as a personality trait comprised of envy, lack of generosity, and possessiveness, while Inglehart (1981) calls it a cultural value in which individuals are more concerned with meeting lower-order (basic) needs than higher-order needs, and Richins and Dawson (1992) refer to it as a type of central organising value which makes people believe “things” are a source of happiness, indicate success, and are central to life. Materialism is generally inversely related to wellbeing (Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Roberts & Clement, 2007). The more an individual tends to value material possessions (either their own or others’), the lower his/her satisfaction, happiness, and quality of life tends to be. Interestingly, while expenditure of disposable income on material possessions has been consistently negatively associated with wellbeing (Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), spending money on intangible purchases – i.e. experiences – is more likely to contribute to our wellbeing than buying things (Howell, Pchelin & Iyer, 2012).

Here, I propose to tentatively extrapolate the above findings to my consideration of contextual political, economic, and cultural factors and flourishing in higher education. Materialism relates to placing emphasis on buying tangible things or products and I argue this may bear a close resemblance to the premise of consumerism. Just as a materialistic individual believes purchasing a tangible product will lead to happiness or success, the consumerist student may approach higher education with the expectation that he/she is buying a product that should lead to satisfaction or happiness. This consumerism may arise in two ways.

One possibility is the tangible payment of tuition fees. When money changes hands in the market, there is an expectation that a product or service of the same value will be received in return. Thus, if a student is required to pay a fee for his or her education (or to undertake debt to do so), this creates some expectation that “something” will be received in return. It could also be argued that the more the amount that is required to be paid, the greater the expectation of significant returns (see Tilak, 2011, for a discussion of the concept of trade in higher education).

A second possibility is that consumerism may arise as an outgrowth of the “student as customer” marketing model. It should be noted that materialism is viewed in the above discussed research as a “trait” – for example, a “materialistic personality,” or “materialistic habit.” Traits are largely fixed or crystallised characteristics intrinsic to the individual. It might be argued that the consumerism observed in university students is different from traits in that it is a culture that arises from the “student as customer”

marketing model adopted by the sector, rather than a fixed, multi-cause characteristic such as personality. In other words, students may not arrive in higher education with a pre-existent “consumerist personality” but may instead be encouraged to adopt a consumerist attitude through the imposition of the “student as customer” marketing model. However, “state” consumerism has also been shown to be negatively associated with wellbeing. For example, Bauer, Wilkie, Kim, and Bodenhausen (2012) conducted a series of experimental studies in which participants without high levels of pre-existing “trait” consumerism were primed with consumerist cues to effect “state” consumerism, which was found to be closely related to negative affect, competitiveness, and selfishness. This finding suggests that the consumerist cues given by universities implementing “student as customer” marketing models may contribute to the emergence of consumerist attitudes in students. Given the conceptual resemblance between materialism and consumerism and the consistently negative relationship between materialism and wellbeing (Howell et al., 2012), it might be reasoned that high consumerist attitudes in students may be associated with lower wellbeing or flourishing.

### **5.3.2.3. Political ideologies and behaviour and trust in government**

There is also some evidence to suggest political ideologies and behaviours and trust in government may influence students’ flourishing within higher education.

Individuals holding right-wing ideological stances have been found in some studies to have greater wellbeing than left-wing individuals (e.g. Bjørnskov, Dreher & Fischer, 2008; Taylor, Funk & Craighill, 2006). Napier and Jost (2008) note that this difference is not fully explained by demographic factors known to be associated with wellbeing, such as age, gender, income, or marital status. They suggest two additional possible explanations. The first concerns cognitive style. Following the tendency for right-wing individuals to prefer simple, black-and-white answers to issues, while left-wingers have a greater tendency to recognise and reflect on ambiguity and complexity (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mennetti & De Grada, 2006), Napier and Jost argue left-wing individuals may be less happy because of greater rumination and introspection. A second possible explanation proposed by Napier and Jost concerns system justification. They suggest that right-wing adherents have a tendency to justify the status quo as being fair and acceptable (Jost, Nosek & Gosling, 2008), contrary to left-wing individuals, who would have a greater tendency to desire social change. If right-wing individuals find the status quo justified, it follows that they would have greater satisfaction and contentment than individuals who find the status quo dissatisfying (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler & Chen, 2007). Although, in a series of large-scale studies,

Napier and Jost (2008) did not find evidence of cognitive style being an explanatory factor in the link between right-wing ideology and wellbeing, they did successfully demonstrate the tendency of right-wing individuals to find the current political and economic system justified had a significant contributive effect on their wellbeing (Schlenker, Chambers & Le, 2012). They also found that left-wing individuals' wellbeing decreased more sharply than that of right-wing individuals over the last three decades at a rate approximately in line with increasing social and economic inequality, suggesting left-wing individuals' decreasing wellbeing may be due to increasing inequality.

However, not all studies have confirmed the association between right-wing ideology and wellbeing. In a meta-analysis involving 97 studies (total  $N=69,221$ ), Onraet, Van Hiel and Dhant (2013) found most effect sizes between measures of political conservatism and wellbeing (life satisfaction, positive affect, absence of negative affect, intrinsic goal pursuit) were weak or non-significant. The only exception to this was a moderate effect for the association between social dominance orientation (the justification of social hierarchy, or belief that certain social groups are superior to others) and intrinsic goal pursuit (pursuing goals for their own sake rather than for external rewards). Interestingly, some evidence also suggests left-wing individuals are less unhappy than right-wing individuals when an incumbent government is left-wing as opposed to right-wing (Dreher & Öhler, 2011).

The mixed findings on left-right ideologies and wellbeing make it difficult to speculate whether a relationship may exist with flourishing and, if so, whether a left or right position would be linked with the greater flourishing. However, they also highlight the complexity of the possible relationship and the need for more research in the area.

Issues of freedom and authority are also related to wellbeing. Economic liberty has been shown to relate to wellbeing (including subjective and psychological wellbeing, over and above material wellbeing) in a study of survey panel data from 86 countries, with the effect being stronger for left-wing individuals than for right-wing individuals (Gehring, 2012). Gehring (2012) argues the link may be mediated by factors such as access to greater wealth, free trade, legal security, and liberal property rights. Additionally, Inglehart, Foa, Peterson and Welzel (2008) report that in an international study, in the 45 of 52 countries where individuals perceived they had increasingly greater freedom of choice, happiness was also increasingly higher during the period 1971-2007. These findings generally suggest actual and perceived liberty is connected to wellbeing, however comparatively little research is available on libertarian and

authoritarian *ideologies* and their relationship with wellbeing. Drawing on these findings, one might reason that libertarian ideologies may be associated with greater flourishing.

The relationships between voting behaviour, political protest, and wellbeing are complex and have not yet been researched in detail. Veenhoven (1996, 2000) argues that objective measures such as protest are ineffective proxies of wellbeing as they fail to capture much of the conceptual depth and subjective nature of wellbeing. However, this does not preclude factors such as voting or protest from being investigated with regard to their relationships with wellbeing. Hammond, Liberini, Proto and Redoano (2013) used data from the British Household Panel Survey to demonstrate that individuals with higher life satisfaction at a given time are more likely to vote for the incumbent party in an election than for another party, and that this effect is particularly true for swing voters. Voters with a stronger sense of partisanship, however, appear to be less likely to change their vote depending on variation in their level of satisfaction. Also, higher levels of subjective wellbeing have been associated with greater intention to vote (Dolan, Metcalfe & Powdthavee, 2008). Although research on protest and wellbeing could not be located at the time of writing, there is some evidence of a link with the notion of political activism. For example, Klar and Kasser (2009) report that individuals with attitudes favouring political activism have greater subjective, psychological, and social wellbeing than those who do not, and are more likely to flourish as assessed by Keyes' (2002) mental health framework. Individuals who actually engage in activism-related activities also report significantly higher levels of subjective vitality than individuals engaging in non-activist activities (Klar & Kasser, 2009). These findings also seem to suggest an investigation of political behaviour and flourishing may yield interesting results, particularly with regard to the flourishing, or lack thereof, of students who did or did not participate in political protests regarding the 2012 increase in undergraduate tuition fees.

The literature on trust in government is considerably broad. In its national study of wellbeing in the UK over the last several years, the Office for National Statistics (2012b) report that trust in government within the UK peaked in 2007, reached a low in 2008, and then increased gradually before dropping again in 2012. Furthermore, reporting low trust in government (operationalised as scoring oneself between 0 and 6 on a 10-point trust scale) was associated with a lower prevalence of satisfaction with life in the UK, while high trust (a score of 7 to 10 on the 10-point scale) was associated with higher prevalence of satisfaction with life in the UK (Office for National Statistics,

2012b). This finding mirrors previous research which has provided support for the positive impact of trust in government on wellbeing across Europe (Hudson, 2006). The conceptual nature of trust as a form of belief or “good faith” that institutions are legitimate and capable of meeting their purpose seems also to be intuitively linked with wellbeing, and it might therefore be speculated that university students harbouring greater trust in government institutions (such as the current government) may have a greater propensity to flourish.

### **5.3.3. Positive education and gaps in the literature**

As I argued throughout Chapters One and Two, research within positive education has to date focused primarily upon micro-level (intra-individual, interpersonal) factors that correlate with or predict wellbeing in educational settings, and has afforded significantly less attention to how wider contextual factors in political, economic, or cultural life may have direct or indirect impacts upon student wellbeing. This appears to reflect a more widespread tradition in the subject matter of positive psychology, though there are, as I mentioned in Chapter One, some noteworthy exceptions to this (Biswas-Diener, 2011).

Overall, the strength of existing positive education research and programmes is their practical application to schools and other educational institutions and the clear enhancements in students’ wellbeing as a result of such application (e.g. Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). However, the gap in current research lies in a lack of knowledge on the causes, correlates, or consequences of student wellbeing beyond micro-level factors such as personal states, traits and tendencies or demographic characteristics (Walker & Prilleltensky, 2010). In other words, at present, the factors in the wider politicoeconomic-cultural context that may be associated with wellbeing in educational settings are largely unknown.

## **5.4. Rationale for this study**

As I noted earlier in this chapter, particularly within higher education settings, the people who constitute the wider context or embody manifestations of it (for example, in their status as political beings) are the same people who are students in a university setting and the same people who, as I have been considering throughout this thesis, can or should be flourishing in that setting. Given this, it seems illogical to try to separate context from wellbeing – or, as Slife and Richardson (2008) would argue, wellbeing from context – or to ignore the potential role of contextual factors in the phenomenon of flourishing in higher education. Combined with the current scarcity of positive

psychology and positive education research on contextual influences on wellbeing within educational settings, this formed the rationale for the present study.

This study's primary aim was to explore trends and disparities in students' flourishing emerging as dependent upon the range of political, economic, and cultural contextual factors I have reviewed in this Introduction section. Specifically, I was interested in aspects of students' socioeconomic circumstances relating to the new tuition fee policy and general funding system and students' political behaviours and attitudes. Following the above discussion of existing research in other contexts, I reasoned these factors represent an important new avenue of investigation in understanding flourishing within the context of higher education. Developing a better understanding of how contextual factors may impact flourishing was anticipated to allow some of the effects of the new tuition fee policy to be evaluated and possible suggestions put forth as to how current and future policy may be developed to enable greater flourishing.

A final point before reporting the study concerns reiteration of the exploratory nature of this research. As I explained in Chapter One, the general approach taken in this thesis is exploratory rather than hypothesis-driven. Therefore, although certain speculations were made regarding the nature of the relationships between contextual factors and flourishing in higher education on the basis of the research reviewed above, these were made for the purpose of demonstrating how the consideration of such factors is pertinent in research on flourishing in higher education. Such speculations should not be taken as specific, *a priori* hypotheses.

## **5.5. Method**

### **5.5.1. Quasi-experimental quantitative field research**

This study utilised a quasi-experimental quantitative field-based approach. In this section, I will offer an explanation of why this approach was reasoned to be appropriate and review the key indicators of research quality in this approach.

#### **5.5.1.1. Justifying the use of quasi-experimental quantitative field research**

Quasi-experimental research may be defined as research in which “experimental” groups are found but also in which individuals are not, or cannot be, randomly assigned to such groups (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002). For example, if I want to investigate differences in subjective wellbeing between men and women, I must conduct a quasi-experimental study because I cannot randomly assign individuals a gender. Field research is any systematic or non-systematic research carried out in “real-life” contexts or settings (e.g. schools, hospitals, homes, train stations) as opposed to environments

deliberately controlled by the researcher (e.g. laboratory) (Burgess, 1984). Quasi-experimental field research may, following these understandings, be conceptualised as research conducted on naturally occurring groups or categories of individuals within field settings, and may be conducted using either traditional quantitative or qualitative research paradigms.

The use of quasi-experimental quantitative field research in the present study may be justified at three levels. Firstly, the quasi-experimental aspect of the approach may be justified in that the nature of the variables examined in the present study was such that a true experimental approach was impossible. One cannot meaningfully assign individuals to being, say, left-wing or to voting in a particular way.

Secondly, the quantitative aspect of the approach was appealing in that it allowed the SOFIA measurement tool, discussed in Chapter Four, to be applied in practice. However, apart from this, I acknowledge that a qualitative approach could have been equally (or perhaps more) insightful in understanding the nature and relationships of the factors I considered in this study. The present quantitatively oriented work may therefore be complemented in future by qualitative inquiry. I will return to this point in the Discussion.

Finally, the research was carried out “in the field” as opposed to laboratory settings as this was congruent with the main argument of this thesis that human flourishing is specific to, and inseparable from, the contexts in which it occurs. To attempt to take flourishing out of its context (higher education and its associated wider contexts) and place it within a controlled environment therefore contradicts my main argument.

#### **5.5.1.2. Quality in quasi-experimental quantitative field research**

To create an overview of the indicators of quality in quasi-experimental quantitative field research, one must examine the recommended indicators of quality in quasi-experimental, quantitative, and field research and combine those most pertinent to the study at hand.

Gersten, Fuchs, Coyne, Greenwood and Innocenti (2003) describe a number of quality indicators for quasi-experimental research. These include sound conceptualisation of the theory underlying the study, appropriate consideration of participants and sampling (for example, comparable demographic and other relevant characteristics across comparison groups), use of conceptually appropriate and psychometrically sound measures, and use of theoretically justifiable data analysis techniques.

Within quantitative research, quality is dependent largely upon (a) conceptual (construct) validity and (b) theoretically meaningful use of measures and sound theoretical justification of the analysis techniques applied to data collected with such measures (Feise, 2002).

Quality in field research can be difficult to assess due to the diversity in conceptualisations of what constitutes high quality field research (Elsbach, 2013). Elsbach (2013) argues that because field research is conducted “in the field” or in applied contexts in which the researcher is an “outsider” who does not attempt to control the environment, quality can best be assured by providing honest and detailed “disclaimers” as to the limitations of the approach or methods used. This can be more effective and feasible than attempting to assure methodological quality in environments in which “pure” methodological quality is effectively unattainable.

In synthesis, the various recommendations regarding the determination of quality in quasi-experimental, quantitative, and field research seem to suggest achieving quality in research combining these approaches may be complex and challenging. However, the recommendations offered by theorists commenting on each approach do provide a reasonable degree of guidance for consideration in carrying out multi-approach research such as the present study. I will evaluate the quality of the present work in the Discussion section of this chapter.

### **5.5.2. Sampling strategy**

As detailed in section 5.5.3 overleaf, the initial sample used for the present study was composed only of first year undergraduates. Because this departs somewhat from the more representative student samples used in the studies reported in Chapters Three and Four, I explain here two primary reasons for using a “narrower” sample in this instance.

Firstly, because one of the main areas of interest in the present study was the wider influence of the recent change in tuition fee policy, I reasoned that efforts to collect data would be more efficiently expended if only students affected by the policy were targeted. The new policy began implementation from September 2012 and the present study was conducted in October and November 2012, and therefore the only students affected by the new policy at the time of data collection were first year undergraduates. Had the present sample included students at higher levels of undergraduate programmes and/or postgraduate students, these students would have remained unaffected by the change in policy, and therefore reasoned to be unlikely to differ a great deal from the more representative samples used previously. Therefore, I reasoned that should noteworthy trends/disparities in flourishing arise in the analysis of

the present sample, comparisons could be made by re-analysis of appropriate previous samples. Such re-analyses, however, would be limited to examinations of consumerism and left-right and libertarian-authoritarian ideologies as this was the first study in the thesis to include a measure of trust in government.

A second reason for using a first year undergraduate sample was for sampling convenience. Apart from serving as the primary sample for data analysis in this chapter, the sample also constituted the second wave of a separate 2-part study comparing first year undergraduate cohorts across the UK in 2011-12 (before the policy change) and in 2012-13 (after the policy change) on factors such as political attitudes and behaviours and wellbeing. Because the SOFIA instrument reported in Chapter Four was not yet available when the first wave of this separate study was initiated in October 2011, comparisons of possible changes in flourishing-in-context as a result of the change in policy were not possible. Therefore I do not report that study in this thesis, and instead focus on analyses carried out within the second wave only.

### **5.5.3. Participants**

Sample 9 was composed of  $N=294$  first year undergraduate students from 30 higher education institutions in England, Scotland, and Wales, including both old (pre-1992) and new (post-1992) universities. Because first year undergraduate students were targeted, the mean age of the sample was somewhat younger than that of previous samples ( $M=20.30$ ;  $SD=5.30$ ), and, similar to previous samples, there was a female majority (70.1%). Of the sample, most students (91.5%) reported being of UK domicile status, while the remaining 8.5% were from the EU. There were no International students in the sample, though this occurred by chance. All students reported being enrolled on their programmes full time. Students had diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including social sciences, natural/physical sciences, arts, and humanities.

### **5.5.4. Measures**

Measures are organised into three groups relating to economic, political behaviour, and political attitude measures. Each group is discussed below.

#### **5.5.4.1. Group 1: Economic measures**

In this study, “economic measures” included two measures relating to actual socioeconomic circumstances of students: tuition fees paid and debt status.

##### **5.5.4.1.1. Tuition fees**

Data on tuition fees were collected using a single purpose-written question. Response options had tuition fees in ranges, beginning with “under £1,000,” followed by “£1,000 to “£1,999,” “£2,000 to £2,999,” and so forth, ending with “£14,000 or over.”

#### **5.5.4.1.2. Debt status**

Data on student debt were collected using a single purpose-written question. To avoid differences in students' interpretations of "debt status," the question was not posed directly. Instead, it asked students to select, from a list, the funding source(s) they used to pay their tuition fees. Response options included self- and family-funding, UK state loans, UK bank/building society loans, non-UK state and/or bank/building society loans, and grant-based funding options which do not require repayment, such as National Health Service or Ministry of Defence funding or institutional or charity organisation scholarships.

#### **5.5.4.2. Group 2: Political behaviour measures**

"Political behaviour measures" in this study included measures of overt political behaviours: voting behaviour and participation in political protest.

##### **5.5.4.2.1. Voting behaviour**

Participants were asked a single question regarding their voting behaviour in the 2010 UK General Election. Response options included a list of all political parties and independent candidates standing in the election, in addition to options reflecting ineligibility to vote (e.g. because of age or citizenship), inability to vote (e.g. because of absence/illness), and voting abstinence.

##### **5.5.4.2.2. Participation in political protest**

Participants were asked a single question regarding their participation in political protest, either with regard to announcement of the change in tuition fee policy in particular, or to public sector funding reductions in general. There were four response options attached to this question, reflecting self-selected participation in protest, participation in protest following invitation from friends/acquaintances, non-participation with a desire to participate in the future, and outright non-participation (non-participation without a desire to participate in the future).

#### **5.5.4.3. Group 3: Political attitude measures**

"Political attitudes measures" included four psychometric measures of attitudes relating to higher education, politics, and government. These were:

- The CATUES (Fairchild et al., 2007; see Appendix I);
- A measure of political leftist ideology (Evans et al., 1996);
- A measure of political libertarian ideology (Evans et al., 1996);
- A measure of trust in government (Torney-Purta et al., 2004). This measure includes six items relating to trust in national government, local council or government, courts, police, political parties, and national parliament.

Respondents are asked to rate their perceived level of trust in each institution on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, “never,” to 4, “always.”

Finally, in addition to the above measures, participants completed the SOFIA (Appendix J).

### **5.5.5. Procedure**

Data collection was carried out using the same procedure as described in section 4.8.3.1.2 (pp. 146-147). Participation was mostly on a voluntary basis. However, a small number of students opted to receive course credit in return for their participation if this was applicable to them.

## **5.6. Results**

### **5.6.1. Theoretical considerations**

Analyses were carried out using MANOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Variance) and Hotelling’s t-tests. MANOVA resembles ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) in that it assesses whether differences in some dependent variable measure (such as flourishing) exist between three or more groups or experimental conditions (such as groups of students based on ethnicity). However, MANOVA has the additional capability to consider multiple dependent variables within the same analysis. It does this by creating a hypothetical composite dependent variable from each of the actual dependent variables entered into the analysis (Howitt & Cramer, 2008). Hotelling’s t-test serves the same function as MANOVA but, like other t-tests, is used in instances where all independent variables have only two groups or conditions within them (Howitt & Cramer, 2008). In the present study, the composite dependent variable was created from students’ SOFIA scores, with scores on the five SOFIA subscales acting as the actual dependent variables.

Rather than use multivariate analyses with a composite dependent variable, one might argue that multiple ANOVAs could have been used on individual dependent variables instead. Therefore, the use of multivariate analyses requires some justification.

One reason why multivariate analyses were preferred was that conducting multiple ANOVAs on the data set would have increased the risk of Type I error, or the risk of apparently significant effects occurring by chance rather than in relation to the true nature of the data (Feise, 2002). The risk of Type I error increases as more statistical tests are applied to a given data set. Therefore, the test(s) applied to a data set should be as parsimonious as possible in terms of its/their capacity to analyse the data in the manner desired. However, it should be acknowledged that some theorists have argued against the use of MANOVA as a means of minimising Type I error risk. For

example, Huberty and Morris (1989) argue that because the alpha values used in multiple ANOVAs are less than, or, at most, equal to the alpha value used in MANOVA only when the results of the MANOVA are non-significant, it is meaningless to suppose that a MANOVA will “protect” one’s results from Type I error.

When a MANOVA is conducted using SPSS, post-analysis ANOVAs are also carried out to show which specific dependent variables exhibit differences across the groups or conditions of the independent variable. This is not discernable in the MANOVA as in that case a composite dependent variable is used. Thus, what Huberty and Morris (1989) maintain is that post-analysis ANOVAs use more conservative alpha values (and are therefore better “protected” against Type I error) only when the initial MANOVA results are non-significant, and when this is the case there is little point in carrying out post-analysis ANOVAs. The way I dealt with this problem is by deciding that if, in any of the analyses carried out within this study, the results of a MANOVA were significant, post-analysis ANOVAs would be examined to determine which specific dependent variable(s) were implicated in the effect *with appropriate adjustment of the alpha values of such ANOVAs to deal with the increased risk of Type I error*. This strategy was reasoned to strike a sound statistical and theoretical balance between general analysis of differences in “composite” flourishing across groups, analysis of differences in specific facets of flourishing across groups, and appropriate recognition of the statistical risks associated with multiple comparisons (Feise, 2002).

The nature of the present study and the conceptual nature of flourishing in higher education were also congruent with the functions of multivariate analyses. For example, in this thesis I conceptualise flourishing as a multidimensional construct (similar to Keyes, 2002, and Seligman, 2011) in which certain dimensions may be influenced differently by the specific independent variables on which I focus in this study (e.g. consumerist attitudes, political ideologies, etc.). The dimensions of flourishing I proposed earlier (subjective wellbeing, striving, positive orientation to university, additional study, and engagement with examinations) are, as can be seen in the correlation matrices given throughout Chapter Four, mostly moderately inter-correlated. The presence of moderate inter-correlations between dependent variables is an instance in which multivariate analyses are particularly preferable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). However, dependent variables should also not measure exactly the same variable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), and this was also congruent with the present study as the subscales of the SOFIA assess conceptually distinct facets of flourishing in higher education. Overall, as Howitt and Cramer (2008) argue, “...these are the

circumstances in which MANOVA is likely to be at its most effective and so would be the preferred approach” (p. 215).

## **5.6.2. Disparities in flourishing across economic factors (Group 1)**

### **5.6.2.1. Data handling**

As outlined in the method section, data on tuition fees were collected using a categorical “tick-box” question which listed levels of fees in ranges. Because the specific categories were too numerous to explore possible disparities in flourishing in a practical manner, they were merged into three “second-order” categories. These were “low fees” (reflecting fees from £0 to £2,999), “medium fees” (reflecting fees from £3,000 to £3,999) and “high fees” (reflecting fees of £4,000 and over). The reason for categorising the original fee ranges in this way was primarily related to the actual proportions by which tuition fees have increased for UK/EU undergraduate students in the UK in 1998, 2006, and 2012. Following this re-categorisation, 26 students were classified as paying low fees, 10 as medium, and 258 as high.

Debt status data were derived from the question regarding funding sources. Since the focus of the study was on the economic constraints posed by taking on and graduating with debt, all loan-related response options from this question were merged to produce a “debt” category, with remaining response options being merged to form a “non-debt” category. Following this, 229 students were classified as having debt, and 65 as not.

### **5.6.2.2. Analyses**

For descriptive statistics regarding the SOFIA in this study, please refer to Table 5.1 (p. 212).

A 3x2 (high/medium/low fees x debt/non-debt) MANOVA carried out on students’ scores on a composite score of the five SOFIA subscales status revealed no statistically significant disparities in this score across either students’ tuition fee level (Pillai’s  $F_{5, 285}=1.82, p=.11, ns$ , partial  $\eta^2=.03$ ) or their debt status (Pillai’s  $F_{10, 572}=1.35, p=.20, ns$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ). Also, no significant interaction was observed between tuition fee level and debt status (Pillai’s  $F_{5, 285}=1.24, p=.30, ns$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ). Following this, post-analysis ANOVAs for each of the SOFIA subscales combined into the initial MANOVA were checked for possible significant differences; however, no noteworthy differences were apparent.

## **5.6.3. Disparities in flourishing across political behaviours (Group 2)**

### **5.6.3.1. Data handling**

Data regarding participants' voting behaviour were re-coded to produce four categories. These reflected voters for "left" political parties and/or independent candidates, voters for "right" political parties and/or independent candidates, individuals who were eligible to vote but chose not to – "abstain," and individuals who were ineligible to vote in the 2010 UK General Election – "ineligible." Categorisation of parties into "left" and "right" groups was performed on the basis of a detailed political analysis of the 2010 UK General Election contenders (Political Compass, 2012). Through this process, just over two thirds (68.0%) of participants were classified having been ineligible to vote in the 2010 election, 18.1% as having voted for a left-wing party, 8.8% as having abstained, and 5.1% as having voted for a right-wing party.

Data regarding participants' participation in political protest were retained in their original form, within four categories that reflected each of the response options to the relevant survey question. These related to "yes" (self-selected participation in protest), "yes friend" (participation following invitation from friends), "no but" (no participation with a desire to participate), and "no" (no participation with no desire to participate). Of the sample, 8.9% were categorised as having participated in protest, 3.7% as having participated upon invitation, 40.1% as not having participated but wishing to, and 47.3% as not having participated.

#### **5.6.3.2. Analyses**

The 4x4 (left/right/abstain/ineligible x yes/yesfriend/nobut/no) MANOVA carried out on students' scores on a composite score of the five SOFIA subscales status revealed no statistically significant disparities in this score across either students' voting behaviour (Pillai's  $F_{15, 840}=.90, p=.57, ns$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ) or their participation in political protest (Pillai's  $F_{15, 840}=.93, p=.62, ns$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ). No interaction between the two independent variables was observed (Pillai's  $F_{25, 1410}=.93, p=.56, ns$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ).

Examination of individual post-analysis ANOVAs revealed no noteworthy differences for any of the five SOFIA subscale scores.

### **5.6.4. Disparities in flourishing across political attitudes (Group 3)**

#### **5.6.4.1. Data handling**

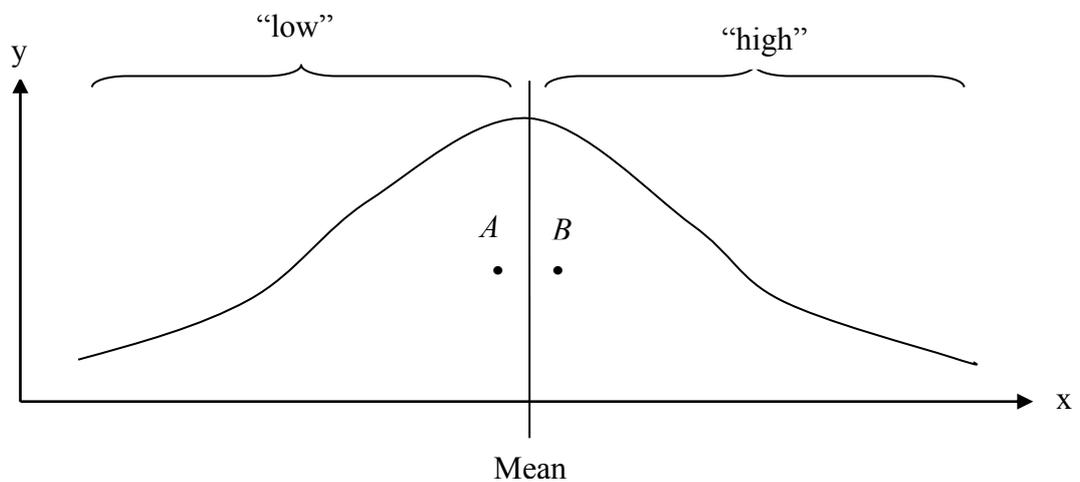
Because the study's focus was on exploring disparities in flourishing in higher education based upon contextual characteristics of the higher education environment, data collected with the CATUES, left-right and libertarianism-authoritarianism scales, and trust in government measure needed to be coded in such a way so as to allow comparisons of SOFIA scores to be possible. Normally, when standardised measures are used, administration to large representative samples allows population norms to be

computed and an appropriate score classification system to be developed (see, for example, Lovibond and Lovibond's [1995] manual for the DASS, discussed in Chapter Four, which sets a score threshold for the indication of diagnosable clinical depression). In this case, none of the measures used in Group 3 analyses were standardised, meaning information on population norms or appropriate score classification systems were unavailable (e.g. the CATUES was an unstandardised measure, whilst the measures for left-right, libertarianism-authoritarianism, and trust in government have not been administered widely enough to compute population norms or operationalised classification systems). Bearing this in mind, I elected to classify all four unstandardised measures into "high" and "low" categories, with the sample mean of each measure being taken at the threshold between the two (see Table 5.1, p. 209). Thus, in each case for the CATUES, left-right, libertarianism-authoritarianism, and trust in government measures, scores below and equal to the mean were classified as "low," while scores above the mean were classified as "high."

Whilst this categorisation adequately served the purpose of the present exploratory analyses, at least two possible criticisms should be noted and acknowledged. Firstly, the strategy used to group scores into "high" and "low" categories was arbitrary. Decisions regarding the number of categories to create and which values to use as thresholds were made on the basis of manual examinations of the raw data and of factors such as scale variance. The CATUES, for example, had low variance ( $\sigma=.26$  for the entire scale, and  $\sigma=.30$  to  $1.50$  for each of the five subscales), and therefore to sort scores into more than two categories would have produced an excessive number of groupings which fail to differ to a reasonable degree in terms of the range of scores they represent. Had the nature of the data been different (for example, in terms of greater variance in scores), a different categorisation strategy may have been more appropriate. Here though, the present strategy is argued to be justified given the nature of the data and lack of existing information on the scales' standardisation.

Secondly, in deciding to categorise variables into two categories each, the sample mean was chosen as the threshold separating the categories, meaning a certain proportion of scores clustered around the "middle" point of the data, on either side of the mean (see Figure 5.1, p. 208). Participant scores represented by, say, points *A* and *B* in Figure 5.1 would not, by themselves, be considered drastically different, yet because of their positioning on opposite sides of the sample mean, they are given different categorisations (*A* would be low, while *B* would be high). Thus, the categorisation

system could be criticised as making theoretically meaningless distinctions between some scores clustered close to the mean. Whilst I acknowledge this challenge, a feasible alternative to overcome it could not be identified. For example, had the data been categorised into three groups instead of two (e.g. “low,” “medium,” and “high” categories), the middle tertile could have been excluded from the analysis, meaning the analysis would not have included scores close to one another yet separated into different categories. However, doing this could have presented at least two further challenges. First, the deliberate exclusion of any given portion of the dataset would have constituted bad practice in terms of the integrity of the statistical analysis (Martin, 1999). Second, exclusion of the middle tertile in particular would have effected a “polarisation” of the remaining data, i.e. in increase in the extremity of their statistical difference, meaning the analysis performed would have compromised a degree of statistical conservativeness. Given these considerations, a two-category system was used as the best strategy available.



**Figure 5.1. Challenges in the two-category classification system for continuous measures.**

#### 5.6.4.2. Analyses

Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations for measures used in this study are given in Table 5.1 overleaf.

**Table 5.1. SOFIA's relationships with contextual factors.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. SOFIA Mean	5.40	.86	.94	-													
2. SOFIA SWB†	5.90	.99	.92	.73**	-												
3. SOFIA STR†	5.72	.64	.91	.78**	.52**	-											
4. SOFIA PO†	4.97	1.25	.68	.88**	.69**	.61**	-										
5. SOFIA AS†	4.75	1.41	.88	.82**	.44**	.57**	.63**	-									
6. SOFIA EE†	5.64	1.17	.70	.72**	.28**	.55**	.50**	.47**	-								
7. CATUES Mean	4.64	.51	.77	-.04	-.11	.07	-.12	-.03	.06	-							
8. CATUES Consumer	3.43	1.22	.69	-.04	-.13*	.02	-.09	.03	.01	.75**	-						
9. CATUES Grade emp	2.36	.93	.63	-.24**	-.26**	-.21**	-.26**	-.15*	-.11	.56**	.31**	-					
10. CATUES Expectatio	5.77	.71	.58	-.06	-.05	.05	-.11	-.08	.03	.65**	.24**	.16	-				
11. CATUES Job perf	5.71	.78	.65	.04	.01	.12	-.01	-.01	.08	.67**	.29**	.12	.55**	-			
12. CATUES Student r	5.96	.58	.53	.30*	.27*	.37**	.21**	.16*	.27**	.28**	.04	-.13	.14	.16*	-		
13. Left-right	17.17	4.11	.79	-.02	-.04	.02	-.07	.05	-.02	.10	.10	.12	.08	.06	-.15*	-	
14. Lib-auth	33.11	6.39	.81	-.07	.10	-.12	-.04	-.06	-.16*	-.26**	-.20	-.08	-.13	-.21**	-.19*	.24**	-
15. Trust in govt	13.23	4.30	.86	.15*	.17*	.06	.08	.08	.20**	-.07	-.06	-.16	-.04	-.01	.12	-.17**	-.04

Note: A Bonferroni correlation was not applied in this instance as correlational analysis was not the focus of the present study. \* $p < .01$  \*\* $p < .001$   
 †SWB=Subjective wellbeing STR=Striving PO=Positive orientation to university AS=Additional study EE=Engagement with examinations.

Analyses for Group 3 variables were somewhat different from those for Groups 1 and 2 reported above. Because each of the independent variables in this case (consumerism, leftism, libertarianism, and trust in government) were binary (categorised into “high” and “low” groups), a Hotelling’s t-test, rather than a MANOVA, was used to assess possible differences in a composite SOFIA score based on students’ membership of the “high” or “low” categories in each of the independent variables.

The Hotelling’s t-test produced statistically significant differences in composite SOFIA scores between “high” and “low” scorers on overall consumerism (Pillai’s  $F_{5, 270}=3.52$ ,  $p=.004$ , partial  $\eta^2=.06$ ) and trust in government (Pillai’s  $F_{5, 270}=3.58$ ,  $p=.004$ , partial  $\eta^2=.06$ ). Also, a significant interactive effect on the composite SOFIA score emerged concerning leftism and trust in government (Pillai’s  $F_{5, 270}=2.31$ ,  $p=.04$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ).<sup>48</sup> Examination of the separate post-analysis ANOVAs indicated that these differences related to particular SOFIA subscales rather than others. For consumerism, significant differences in actual SOFIA subscales emerged for the subjective wellbeing ( $F_{1, 274}=6.55$ ,  $p=.01$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ) and positive orientation to university ( $F_{1, 274}=3.97$ ,  $p=.05$ , partial  $\eta^2=.01$ ) subscales. For trust in government, differences were indicated in the subjective wellbeing ( $F_{1, 274}=8.05$ ,  $p=.005$ , partial  $\eta^2=.03$ ), positive orientation to university ( $F_{1, 274}=4.82$ ,  $p=.03$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ), and engagement with examinations ( $F_{1, 274}=10.44$ ,  $p=.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ) subscales. Finally, for the interaction between leftism and trust in government, differences emerged in the positive orientation to university subscale only ( $F_{1, 274}=4.39$ ,  $p=.04$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ). Possible differences in other SOFIA subscales were checked across all independent variables, and one was found to be significant in the post-analysis ANOVAs despite being non-significant in the initial Hotelling’s analysis. This related to the engagement with examinations subscale, which exhibited significant differences based on libertarianism ( $F_{1, 274}=4.16$ ,  $p=.04$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ) with higher engagement being associated with lesser libertarianism.

Examination of sample means on relevant SOFIA subscales for consumerism, trust in government, and the interaction between consumerism and trust in government were examined to ascertain the direction of the differences observed (see Table 5.1, p. 209). Membership of the “low” consumerism group was found to be associated with both higher subjective wellbeing and higher positive orientation to university scores on

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<sup>48</sup> Results for all independent variables (including interactions) not mentioned here were found to be non-significant in both the Hotelling’s t-test and the separate post-analysis t-tests and are therefore not discussed further. Also, due to the difficulty in applying theoretically meaningful interpretations to interactions involving more than two independent variables, interactions with three or more independent variables in the present analysis were checked for significance (all were *ns*) but not taken into consideration.

the SOFIA, while membership of the “high” trust in government group was found to be associated with higher scores on the subjective wellbeing, positive orientation to university, and engagement with examinations scores on the SOFIA. In the interaction, when students had high leftism, trust in government seemed to make little difference to their scores on the engagement with examinations subscale on the SOFIA, however, when they had low leftism, high trust in government was associated with higher engagement with examinations scores, while low trust in government was associated with lower engagement in examinations scores.

In order to ascertain whether the above effects were specific to students in any particular nation within the United Kingdom, independent samples t-tests were carried out to assess possible differences in any of the measures used across England (where the 2012 tuition fee policy was effective) and Wales and Scotland (where the existing funding arrangements were still in effect). No significant differences across nations were found in students’ SOFIA scores, student consumerism, left-right and libertarian-authoritarian ideologies, or trust in government. This appeared to indicate the effects were generalised across the UK.

## **5.7. Further analyses**

### **5.7.1. Justification of further analyses**

The emergence of noteworthy results in the Group 3 analyses led to my reasoning that further exploration of the observed differences in flourishing in different samples of students may contribute to a more complete understanding of the relationships between student consumerist attitudes, trust in government, leftism, and flourishing. Regrettably, due to time constraints and the desire to focus data collection efforts on students directly affected by the change in tuition fee policy, data from other students (such as undergraduates still operating on the previous tuition fee policy or postgraduates) were not available in the 2012-13 data collection window. Therefore, I selected two relevant existing datasets reported in Chapter Four for re-analysis with a focus on further exploring the patterns in flourishing that emerged in the Group 3 analyses of the present chapter. The samples selected were Sample 5 (previously used to assess the SOFIA’s relationships with personality traits and student consumerism) and Sample 8 (previously used to assess cross-cultural validity of the SOFIA in Australia and New Zealand).

These samples were selected on the basis of their inclusion of both the SOFIA and the CATUES measures, meaning appropriate analyses of possible differences in flourishing based on high or low consumerism could be carried out. This was reasoned to be particularly of interest because both samples included students drawn from

populations not affected by the 2012 change in tuition fee policy, with Sample 5 being collected in the UK prior to implementation of the policy, and Sample 8 in Australia and New Zealand, where no significant change in tuition fee policy had been implemented or scheduled for implementation at the time of data collection. Unfortunately, however, neither Sample 5 nor 8 included the measure of trust in government, meaning further exploration of this factor could not be carried out. Therefore, combined with the reason that substantial focus in the present study was on the issue of student consumerist attitudes towards higher education, I elected to focus the further explorations on consumerist attitudes alone.

### **5.7.2. Re-analysis of Sample 5**

Descriptive statistics for the measures administered to Sample 5 were reported in Chapter Four (Table 4.7, p. 159). Using the mean consumerism score of 3.75, scores below and equal to the mean were categorised as “low” ( $N=128$ ), while those above were categorised as “high” ( $N=127$ ).

A Hotelling’s t-test carried out on the data demonstrated a significant difference in composite flourishing in higher education between low and high scorers on the student consumerism measure (Pillai’s  $F_{5, 249}=3.42$ ,  $p=.005$ , partial  $\eta^2=.06$ ). This prompted an examination of the post-analysis ANOVAs to ascertain which aspects of flourishing in higher education were most implicated in this difference. Significant effects were observed for overall SOFIA scores (Pillai’s  $F_{1, 253}=11.16$ ,  $p=.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ), subjective wellbeing (Pillai’s  $F_{1, 253}=8.75$ ,  $p=.003$ , partial  $\eta^2=.03$ ), striving (Pillai’s  $F_{1, 253}=3.85$ ,  $p=.05$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ), positive orientation to university (Pillai’s  $F_{1, 253}=10.67$ ,  $p=.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ), and additional study (Pillai’s  $F_{1, 253}=10.01$ ,  $p=.002$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ). However, no effect was observed for engagement with examinations (Pillai’s  $F_{1, 253}=.59$ ,  $p=.44$ , *ns*, partial  $\eta^2=.002$ ).

### **5.7.3. Re-analysis of Sample 8**

Descriptive statistics for the measures administered to Sample 8 were reported in Chapter Four (Table 4.9, pp. 166-167). Using the mean consumerism score of 3.80, scores below and equal to the mean were categorised as “low” ( $N=128$ ) while those above were categorised as “high” ( $N=116$ ).

A Hotelling’s t-test was applied to the data. Similar to the Sample 5 re-analysis, this revealed a significant difference in composite flourishing in higher education scores between low and high scorers on student consumerism (Pillai’s  $F_{6, 237}=2.85$ ,  $p=.01$ , partial  $\eta^2=.07$ ). Examination of post-analysis ANOVAs showed the effect was significant for overall flourishing in higher education (Pillai’s  $F_{1, 242}=9.67$ ,  $p=.002$ ,

partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ), subjective wellbeing (Pillai's  $F_{1, 242}=10.33$ ,  $p=.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ), striving (Pillai's  $F_{1, 242}=5.11$ ,  $p=.03$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ), and positive orientation to university (Pillai's  $F_{1, 242}=11.61$ ,  $p=.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.05$ ). A borderline significant effect was observed for additional study (Pillai's  $F_{1, 242}=3.72$ ,  $p=.055$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ). However, the effect for engagement was non-significant (Pillai's  $F_{1, 242}=.09$ ,  $p=.77$ , *ns*, partial  $\eta^2<.001$ ).

## **5.8. Discussion**

### **5.8.1. Overview**

In this chapter I aimed to present an exploratory study on some of the wider contextual factors that may affect university students and their potential to flourish in higher education. The specific focus was on actual economic circumstances of students (their payable tuition fees and debt status), students' political behaviours (how they vote and/or whether they participate in political protest), and their attitudes (political ideologies, trust in government, and consumerist attitudes towards higher education). This research was important in that it was, to the best of my knowledge, the first positive psychological investigation into the relationships between flourishing and wider macro-level contextual factors in higher education. In addition to this, it was also the first quasi-experimental study of student wellbeing and consumerism in the UK, and one of the first preliminary evaluations of the impact of the 2012 increase in undergraduate tuition fees (Bolton, 2012).

In the main study of first year UK undergraduates who had been affected by the implementation of the new tuition fee policy, results showed that students' flourishing in higher education did not significantly differ dependent upon their level of tuition fees, their debt status, their voting behaviour in the 2010 UK General Election, or their participation in political protest. However, flourishing in higher education did differ dependent upon students' level of consumerist attitudes towards higher education and their degree of trust in government. Students with high consumerist attitudes towards higher education tended to be less likely to flourish, while those with a greater degree of trust in government tended to be more likely to flourish, especially when they were less left-wing.

The finding that flourishing in higher education seemed to be negatively affected when student consumerist attitudes were high prompted a return to two existing data sets (Samples 5 and 8) to examine whether the same pattern would be observed in data collected from students not affected by the 2012 tuition fee increase. This appeared to be the case, with students in both pre-fee-rise UK and in Australia and New Zealand

being less likely to flourish when they had a strong consumerist attitude towards higher education. The effects observed in both Sample 9 and in the re-analysis of Samples 5 and 8 appeared to apply variously to some aspects of flourishing in higher education more than others and, in Sample 9 at least, were generalised across the UK and not concentrated in any particular constituent nation.

In this section, I will consider possible explanations for these results and discuss the strengths, limitations, and possible applications of the research. I will conclude the chapter by situating the study within the thesis.

## **5.8.2. Sample 9 findings**

### **5.8.2.1. Flourishing and student consumerist attitudes**

As I mentioned in the Introduction section of this chapter, little research exists on the phenomenon of student consumerism (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005), let alone the connections between student consumerism and student wellbeing. I did discuss, though, some of the literature on materialism and wellbeing (e.g. Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Roberts & Clement, 2007). An excessive focus on obtaining and valuing material possessions has an inverse relationship with many facets of wellbeing (Howell et al., 2012; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), and I speculate whether the conceptual explanation behind this relationship may be extrapolated to the present finding that students with high levels of consumerist attitudes are significantly less likely to be flourishing at university than their less consumerist peers.

A student with a strong consumerist attitude towards his/her education will expect to receive a tangible “product” from the university. Since the student has paid tuition fees, and perhaps taken on some volume of debt in order to do so, there may be an impression that his/her “end of the deal” has already been done, with the educational ball now being in the university’s court to provide the products or services the student expects. In other words, the consumerist student is relatively passive in the process of having his/her expectations met and achieving satisfaction. This seems conceptually antithetical to flourishing, which generally emphasises the agency of individuals in pursuing wellbeing (such as self-determination, self-motivation, or self-selected positive cognitions; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 1990). This is a possible explanation of why more consumerist students appear to be less likely to be flourishing.

The finding that consumerist students are less likely to flourish is not in and of itself confirmation that my speculation is correct. It is, however, suggestive that the relationship between flourishing and student consumerism is one that merits further research in the future. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, one needs to remember

that some contextual factors examined in this study did not appear to be associated with differences in flourishing despite the theoretical possibility that that they could have been. For example, the actual tuition fees and debt status of students did not implicate their flourishing despite research within wellbeing economics suggesting less financial burden is associated with greater personal wellbeing (e.g. Helliwell, 2003). Also, the relationship between consumerism and flourishing (or indeed any of the other measures used) was not specific to either England (where higher fees apply) or to Scotland and Wales (where existing subsidisation is continuing), and instead appeared to be a generalised effect across the UK. Taken together, these findings indicate that students' flourishing may be less related to actual economic or financial changes in their circumstances (or indeed in their political behaviour, which also exhibited no effect) and more to consumerism as a cultural trend. Therefore there seems to be much yet to be explored in research relating to how students think about and negotiate the "business" and "learning" aspects of higher education, what role they understand tuition fees to have, and whether and to what extent they believe they have a responsibility to be concerned about their own flourishing as a pursuit independent of the payment of tuition fees. White's (2007) qualitative exploration of Australian undergraduate students' expectations from university institutions and teaching staff, which I mentioned in the Introduction of this chapter, serves as an example of such exploration, though she was not concerned with flourishing as a specific construct of interest in that study.

The specific subscales of the SOFIA on which the differences emerged were subjective wellbeing and positive orientation to university. As I discussed in Chapter Four when initially developing the SOFIA, the subjective wellbeing subscale was established as a dimension of flourishing relating to happiness, enjoyment, and contentment within the context of education, while positive orientation to university related to positive attitudes with regard to one's capability and capacity in relation to academic work, learning, and achievement (e.g. motivation, determination, optimism). Whilst it is not possible to propose a definite explanation of why these particular aspects of flourishing were implicated by consumerist attitudes as opposed to others, speculation can be made. One possible explanation for this may be that constructs such as subjective wellbeing and positive orientation to university are inherently dependent upon intrinsic reward (i.e. pursuit for their own sake rather than as a means to an end). In order for the experience of these phenomena to be "genuine" (meaningful and legitimately contributive to overall wellbeing), they must be pursued as worthwhile ends in themselves (Seligman, 2002, 2011) and must involve effortful action on the part

of the pursuer (Seligman, 1990). This seems to be at odds with the understanding underpinning consumerism, that the relationship between the student and the university is similar to that between a buyer and seller (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild et al., 2007). Within this understanding, the student's role is not effortful; rather, one simply pays the money and sits back with the expectation that valued ends (grades, knowledge, graduation) will be provided as a meal would be provided in a restaurant (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002).

#### **5.8.2.2. Flourishing, trust in government, and left-wing ideology**

The other noteworthy finding in the Sample 9 study was that students with a high level of trust in government were significantly more likely to flourish, particularly when they were less left-wing. This appeared to be particularly true of the subjective wellbeing, positive orientation to university, and engagement with examinations dimensions of flourishing in higher education for trust in government by itself. For the interaction between trust in government and leftist ideology, the effect applied to the positive orientation to university dimension only.

The scarcity of systematic research combining trust in government with flourishing poses a challenge in interpreting this finding. That higher trust should be associated with a greater likelihood of flourishing does follow earlier mentioned research at the national and international levels (Hudson, 2006; Office for National Statistics, 2012b) which has shown having greater belief that government institutions are legitimate and effective in fulfilling their purposes in a trustworthy manner is associated with higher satisfaction with living. This link seems intuitive in that, similar to the Eriksonian (1959) conception of trust as a psychosocial resource necessary for healthy growth and development, trust in government institutions may give an individual grounds for feeling happier or more satisfied that life is going well.

Within the context of higher education, the link between trust in government and flourishing in higher education may be associated with student level of trust in the present government's ability to create and implement policy that is in the best interest of both students and university communities. When a student trusts that government is legitimate and capable of fulfilling its purpose (for instance within its remit to oversee the higher education sector), he/she may feel less inclined to worry about the implementation of policies imposed by government and more inclined to feel happy at university and to pursue academic work and learning. Hence, he/she may have a greater propensity to flourish if trust is high.

Aside from the main finding that high scorers on trust in government were more likely to flourish in higher education, there was also the finding that this was particularly true for the positive orientation to university dimension when such students had a low adherence to left-wing ideologies. A possible explanation of this is the political stance of the present coalition government. The government is composed of a Conservative Party (right-of-centre) majority; however, the coalition partner, the Liberal Democrat Party, which is traditionally left-of-centre, now takes a largely centrist or right-of-centre political stance according to the perceptions of the British public (YouGov, 2011). Given the tendency for right-wing individuals to be more content and for left-wing individuals to feel more dissatisfaction with the status quo (Jost et al., 2008; Wakslak et al., 2007), the present interaction may be explained by left-wing individuals possibly experiencing less trust in the (non-left) government and/or its associated policies and therefore being less motivated to pursue flourishing at university.

### **5.8.3. Replication of the consumerism effect: Samples 5 and 8**

When the association between high consumerism and low flourishing was investigated further in Samples 5 and 8 from Chapter Four, the effect was found to re-appear. At the times that data from these samples were collected, the new tuition fee policy had not yet been implemented in the UK (though it had been announced) and no students had yet been affected by it. Conversely, in Australia and New Zealand, although higher education is funded in a similar way to the UK, funding arrangements were stable and no major changes to funding policy had been scheduled for implementation. Thus, the mirroring of the effect in samples not affected by the change in tuition fee policy (Bolton, 2012) is interesting and suggests, similar to the Sample 9 findings, that consumerist attitudes may be linked with a decreased likelihood of flourishing independently of actual economic changes in the higher education sector's funding system and fairly consistently across the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

As Neely (2000) argues, it may be necessary to look beyond the introduction of tuition fees to complex market forces and cultural trends to better understand how consumerism arises. Furthermore, to better understand whether the present interpretation of the consumerism-flourishing link can be supported, future research could examine what factors may mediate the relationship (for example, factors such as passivity or instrumental learning) and whether the relationship is observed in settings where the culture of higher education is different from that prevalent in Western nations. For example, educational institutions in Bhutan follow a national policy to

focus on wellbeing (Gross National Happiness, which I mentioned in Chapter Four) rather than economic or market concerns as the overarching goal of all public activity (Ura, Alkire & Zangmo, 2010). Examining the prevalence of student consumerism and whether it is associated with student flourishing in Bhutanese higher education in the same way as observed in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand would therefore give an indication of whether it is possible to achieve more flourishing when a different approach to policy and culture is taken.

#### **5.8.4. Strengths, limitations, and quality of the study**

As I mentioned at the beginning of the Discussion, the present study had a number of strengths that differentiate it from existing research in the area of higher education. These include its position as the first study in positive psychology to examine some of the wider contextual factors that affect student wellbeing in higher education settings. Such factors go beyond, but complement, understandings gained of the relationships between flourishing and micro-level factors such as individual differences or other personal characteristics (e.g. Howell, 2009). The study was also effective in evaluating some aspects of the new tuition fee policy for undergraduate students in the UK (Bolton, 2012). In comparing measures such as student consumerism and flourishing across samples that were and were not affected by the new policy, it appeared that the policy's immediate impact on such measures may be negligible. This finding paves the way for further evaluations of the impact of the policy on these and other measures. Finally, this study was also thought to be the first systematic research project examining the construct of student consumerism in relation to flourishing within the UK. The limited systematic research on student consumerism is largely from North America (e.g. Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild et al., 2005; Fairchild et al., 2007) and Australia (e.g. White, 2007), and considering this it was useful to gain initial insight into the nature of student consumerist attitudes as they are held by UK university students and their connections with student wellbeing.

Several limitations of this research should also be recognised. The quasi-experimental and quantitative approaches used meant that some contextual factors and their inter-relationships could not be researched at a conceptual or experiential depth that would allow participants to articulate their own interpretations of the research issue. These approaches instead allowed interesting statistical effects to be observed which, although congruent with theoretical explanations, may not necessarily be endorsed by the students from whom they emerged. Had a non-experimental/qualitative approach been used, this would have allowed such an endorsement to be explored and evaluated.

Such an approach would also have allowed contextual factors such as consumerism to be investigated at a contextual level, for example as a cultural trend, social practice, or institution, rather than as individual-level manifestations of these.

Another limitation of the present research was that the old data sets used for further analyses (Samples 5 and 8) did not include the measure of trust in government used with the main sample (Sample 9). This allowed only the finding on student consumerism to be explored further. Effects of trust, or trust and leftist ideologies which emerged in the original study could not be explored further, so their applicability to cultural settings other than the UK could not be assessed. Such assessment would have been useful in that evaluations could have been made as to whether trust in government and leftist ideologies implicate flourishing in the same way in Australia and New Zealand (or indeed in any other country) as they appear to in the UK.

The use of psychometric measures and statistical data analysis methods in this study may be both a strength and a limitation. On one hand, it allowed the stability of the effect between student consumerism and flourishing to be evaluated across multiple cultural settings. On the other hand, it could be debated whether this stability was due to actual stability in the effect or simply to the same psychometric measures being used.

Finally, I will return to the discussion of quality indicators for quasi-experimental quantitative field research I presented earlier in this chapter. The recommendations for assuring quality offered by Gersten et al. (2003) could be argued to have been met in the following ways: Sound conceptualisation of the theory underlying the study was addressed by presenting a review of research in the area of political, economic, and cultural contextual factors in relation to wellbeing (see Introduction); appropriate consideration of the sample was addressed by giving consideration to the characteristics of students included in the sample in the context of the research issue and the timing of data collection to ensure appropriate composition of the sample (see Method); use of conceptually appropriate and psychometrically sound measures was addressed through selection of measures appropriately contextualised to the settings of interest (e.g. student consumerism, flourishing in higher education) and possessive of good psychometric properties; and use of theoretically justifiable data analysis techniques was ensured by offering a detailed consideration of the reasons for using MANOVA and Hotelling's t-test to demonstrate justifiability (see Results). Furthermore, additional indicators of quality, such as in quantitative (Feise, 2002) and field research (Elsbach, 2013), were addressed by offering feasible and theoretically grounded interpretations of the statistical effects observed and offering

acknowledgement of the key limitations of the research (within the present Discussion section).

#### **5.8.5. Applications to theory and practice**

At present, positive psychology and positive education research has not devoted a great deal of attention to macro-level contextual factors that may influence student flourishing. This study contributed to addressing this gap by investigating the impact of some individual-level manifestations of contextual factors relating to the political, economic, and cultural contexts of higher education. This research may be utilised by designers and implementers of positive education programmes in universities, of which there are still very few (Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009). Most existing positive education programmes take the form of interventions of curricula based on empirical positive psychology research and are implemented in educational settings in an experimental manner (e.g. Waters, 2011) but largely neglect the role wider contextual influences play in the cultivation of flourishing in students, such as culture, politics, or economic circumstances.

Existing positive education programmes, particularly ones intended for higher education, could use the present research to incorporate greater awareness of factors such as student consumer culture and political influences such as ideology and institutional trust and the complex ways in which they implicate students' ability to flourish at university. The research could also be extended by developers of such programmes to more fully synthesise our understanding of flourishing as a phenomenon that must emerge not just from enabling positive psychology-based activities or interventions, but also in the context of student consumer culture and wider political and economic constraints placed upon universities as complex multi-role organisations.

This work may also be used by policymakers in evaluating the usefulness of current education policy implemented within the higher education sector and in contributing to the development of higher education policy in the future. The present work served as a useful initial evaluation of some aspects of the 2012 tuition fee policy (Bolton, 2012), for example in terms of its apparent impact on student wellbeing and consumerist attitudes across different nations within the UK. This policy was developed and put into effect largely as part of the wider programme of state funding reductions taking place in response to the global economic crisis over the past several years and its primary purpose was to contribute to restructuring the funding of higher education (Bolton, 2012). It appears that considerations of student wellbeing, consumerism, or trust in government institutions did not form an important aspect of policy development

in this case. Whilst it is necessary to acknowledge the necessity, in some cases, of certain forms of funding changes in the public sector to achieve more sustainable economic activity, overall a greater consideration of student flourishing as a worthwhile end in higher education when developing policy may be an appropriate avenue to pursue in future. Presently, although the new policy did not appear to have caused any “harm” to student flourishing within higher education, neither did it appear to have made an improvement. Whether this is ethical or desirable as a policy remains an open question.

#### **5.8.6. Situating this study within the thesis**

This study aimed to address the third and final aspect of contextlessness arising from abstractionist ontological perspectives in positive psychology – the relationships between flourishing and its wider contexts (Slife & Richardson, 2008). Together with the work discussed in Chapters Three and Four, it addressed some of the questions and problematic issues arising from contextless theories of flourishing in positive psychology and positive education that I discussed in Chapters One and Two.

Completion of the work presented in this Chapter led me to return to the proposal I made at the end of Chapter Two regarding the development of a preliminary context-specific theory of flourishing. I will present this theory, and general discussion of all work presented in this thesis, in Chapter Six.

# CHAPTER SIX

## THEORY PROPOSAL AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

### 6.1. Abstract

In this chapter, I will return to my proposal at the end of Chapter Two to suggest a preliminary context-specific theory of flourishing in higher education. I will begin by giving an overview of the main argument and findings I have discussed in previous chapters. Then, I will mention a few caveats and considerations regarding the type of theory I will propose. Following this, I will offer an explanation and discussion of the preliminary “context-specific theory of flourishing” drawing on the arguments and research presented in this thesis. Next, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of the thesis in general and make suggestions as to how it may be utilised. Finally, I will end the chapter, and thesis, with some concluding remarks.

### 6.2. Towards a context-specific theory of flourishing in higher education

#### 6.2.1. Overview of main argument and findings

Before discussing the preliminary theory of flourishing in higher education proposed in this thesis, I present here a brief review of the thesis’ argument and findings, as the theory will largely follow from and draw on these.

This thesis’ overall aim was to present exploratory research on students’ flourishing in the context of higher education. Whilst the thesis recognises the utility of extant positive psychological theories of flourishing and other forms of wellbeing, its primary critique of these was their tendency to separate, or abstract, flourishing from the contexts in which it occurs (Slife & Richardson, 2008). Thus, in much of the practice-oriented literature on positive education, theories of “contextless” wellbeing are applied to educational contexts in a top-down/deductive manner, without consideration of how such abstract theoretical frameworks are contextualised at the level of everyday cultural understandings and practices in the classroom. I therefore set out in this thesis to explore how flourishing may be understood and measured in higher education using a bottom-up/inductive approach, and explore some of the wider contextual factors that may influence flourishing in higher education settings. In carrying out this research, the underlying purpose of the thesis was to contribute to the development of a theory of flourishing that is contextualised and appropriate for application to higher education.

This was envisaged to have utility for higher education students, staff, and policymakers to develop a greater awareness and understanding of the context-specific nature of flourishing. The notion that flourishing is inherently context-specific and should be theorised as such therefore constituted the main argument of this thesis.

Noteworthy findings emerging from the research presented in this thesis may be summarised as follows:

- The conceptualisation of flourishing in the context of higher education as constructed by students possesses many of the same characteristics of flourishing proposed by contextless theories (e.g. Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2002, 2011). However, using an inductive approach to arrive at this finding allowed the characteristics to manifest in a contextually detailed manner, meaning the specific ways students flourish in higher education could be identified and supported with qualitatively-derived evidence. Furthermore, some characteristics of flourishing in higher education that emerged from inductively oriented research (e.g. learning, progress) are unique to higher education and do not feature in contextless theories;
- Flourishing in higher education can be measured validly and reliably in a context-specific manner that draws on students' construction of this concept. Such measurement is not absolute or exclusive, but does offer a useful contribution to the various empirical and non-empirical methods of assessment that exist;
- The levying of higher tuition fees in 2012, loan-related debt, voting behaviour in the 2010 UK General Election, and participation in political protest do not appear to be associated with significant differences in students' flourishing;
- Flourishing students (as assessed by high scores on the SOFIA) are significantly less likely than their low-scoring counterparts to hold consumerist attitudes towards higher education, and significantly more likely to trust in government institutions; and
- Students not affected by the 2012 tuition fee increase (students studying before the policy began implementation and students in Australia and New Zealand) also exhibit the high flourishing-low consumerism effect.

It is useful to bear these general findings in mind when considering the following discussions. Next, I must discuss some issues that require consideration before proposing the theory of context-specific flourishing.

### **6.2.2. Considerations in proposing the theory**

Several issues required consideration before proposal of the preliminary context-specific flourishing theory. These related to deciding the nature of the theory, establishing its purpose and scope, and designing its structure.

When I discussed my aim of proposing a context-specific theory of flourishing in higher education at the end of Chapter Two, I did not go into detail about exactly what I envisaged the theory would be composed of, or what it would “look like.” For example, was the theory envisaged to be able to dictate what flourishing is, what factors constitute it, or what factors lead to it? It would have been difficult to decide this before the research reported in Chapters Three through Five had been carried out as the approach taken in those chapters was both inductive and exploratory (Burr, 2003). If the research had instead been hypothesis-driven (cf. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001), or built uncritically on an existing base of research, it might have been possible to foresee, or propose *a priori*, what the theory was intended to offer. In this case, the decision was left until after the completion of the work in Chapters Three through Five. This was because, in line with my main argument that flourishing is context-specific and with my argument in Chapter Three that flourishing arises “from the ground up,” the emerging theory I will propose was essentially an outgrowth of the direction each of the studies took, their findings, and my own learning journey throughout this thesis.

Thus, completion of the exploratory work in the preceding chapters led to a “post hoc” consideration of what sort of theory of flourishing could most reasonably, and most usefully, be developed from the work conducted. My initial proposition that flourishing is context-specific appeared to be supported by the findings reported in Chapter Three, which highlighted some of the unique aspects of flourishing in higher education. Given this, it would seem to contradict my main argument to propose a theory of flourishing that attempts to dictate what flourishing is (or what it is composed of). The particular conceptualisation of the construct that emerged in Chapter Three could readily be irrelevant to other cultures, other universities, or even other students. Furthermore, attempting to counter this problem by proposing a more generic theory of what flourishing is would seem to lead one back to the existing positive psychological theories of flourishing I criticised in Chapter One precisely for being impractically generic. Also, adding a “disclaimer” to such a generic theory to acknowledge the possibility of unique forms of expression or contextualisation, as some theorists do (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2001), was unattractive as such a disclaimer would not, as I argued in Chapter One, go far in explaining what these unique forms of expression or contextualisation actually are.

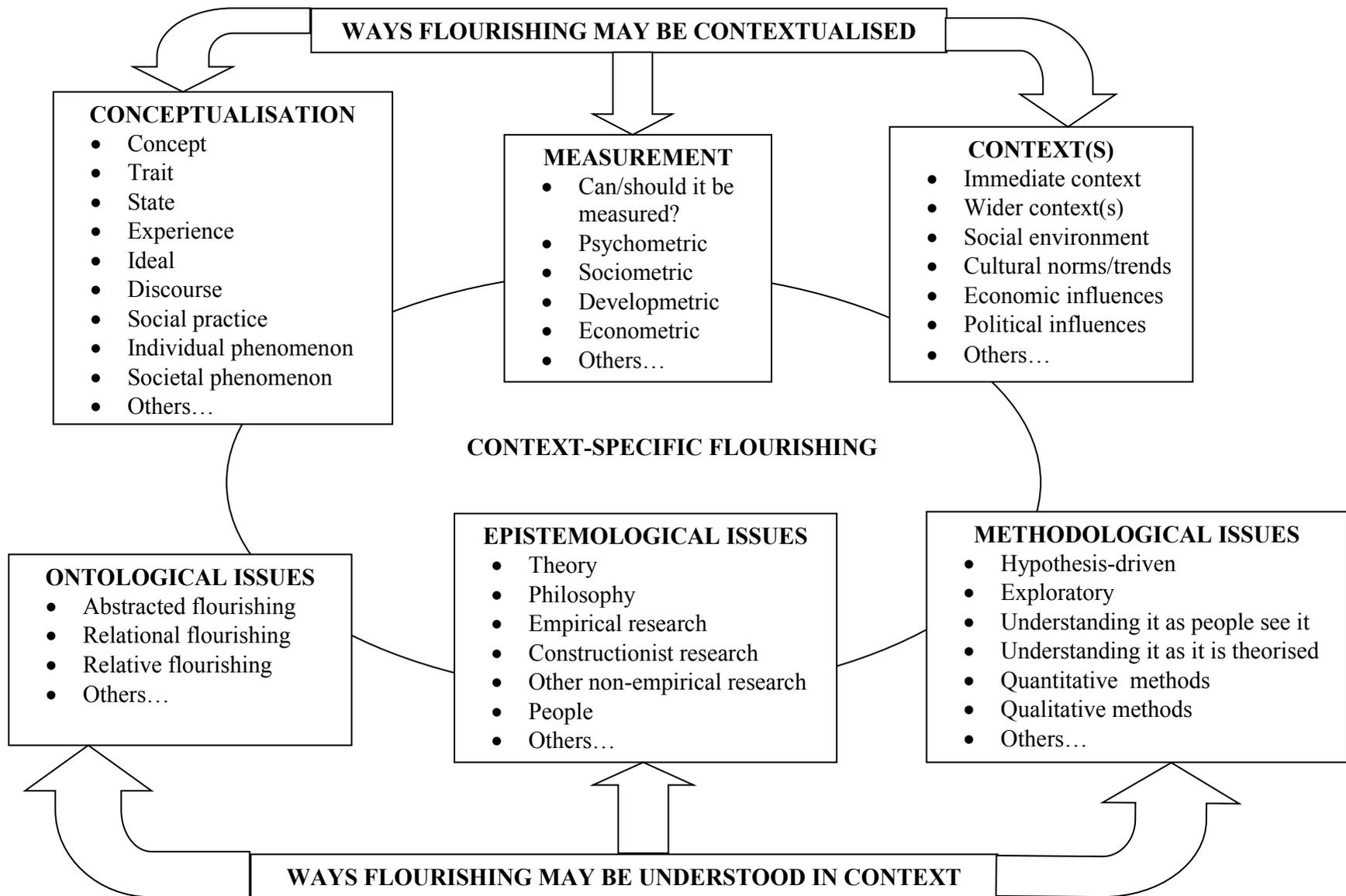
Another discounted possibility was a theory of how flourishing “works,” or of its causal relationships with other factors. The work completed in Chapter Four allowed a particular conception of flourishing in higher education to be measured, and this was done in Chapter Five with a number of other variables of theoretical interest. Although this work revealed some interesting relationships between flourishing, student consumerism, and trust in government, the explanations I offered for these are not yet conceptually solidified to a degree sufficient to be able to propose a functional theory of flourishing. Moreover, such a theory would change dependent upon the particular causal factors investigated, be these intra-individual (e.g. emotions, cognitions, traits), interpersonal (e.g. social behaviours, interactions), or cultural (e.g. economic or political influences, social practices, norms).

In this chapter the context-specific theory of flourishing that I will propose is not one which attempts to explain what flourishing is or from what it arises, but instead a theory that suggests how flourishing can be understood and investigated in a contextually sensitive manner, both in higher education and in other settings. Thus it may more accurately be referred to as a “theoretical framework” – it is based less on the thesis’ actual findings and more on its ontological and epistemological approaches, its methods, and the ways in which flourishing may be contextualised. The theory’s scope extends insofar as does the thesis’ arguments and findings, as my aim is for the theory to be grounded in the thesis and associated arguments, rather than to be overly speculative. I propose the theoretical framework in the next section.

### **6.3. A theoretical framework for context-specific flourishing**

The theoretical framework for context-specific flourishing that I propose is, as I explained above, a framework for understanding how flourishing may be contextualised (for example, in higher education) rather than for explaining it or how it functions. The framework is composed of two broad dimensions. These are concerned with (a) the ways in which flourishing may be contextualised, which I have discussed throughout this thesis, and with (b) the ways in which such contextualisation may be understood and researched. A possible visual depiction of the framework appears in Figure 6.1 (p. 226).

In the next sections, I will offer some discussion of the components of the theoretical framework.



**Figure 6.1. A theoretical framework for context-specific flourishing.**

### **6.3.1. Ways flourishing may be contextualised**

This dimension of the framework is intended to suggest ways in which flourishing may be contextualised. As I mentioned in Chapter One, many extant positive psychological theories of flourishing (e.g. Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2002, 2011) either do not explicitly recognise the role context plays in our ability to understand flourishing, or they acknowledge the role of context but do not consider in detail what this role involves. Here, I propose that there are at least three ways in which flourishing may be contextualised; these draw on the three areas of contextlessness arising from abstractionist ontological perspectives (Slife & Richardson, 2008) that I have discussed throughout this thesis. I will elaborate on each of the components of the “ways flourishing may be contextualised” dimension of the proposed framework below.

#### **6.3.1.1. Conceptualisation**

In this thesis, I conceptualised flourishing as an intangible concept, or interrelated group of concepts, and presented it as such in my content analytic study in Chapter Three (see Figure 6.1, p. 226). I elected to conceptualise flourishing as a concept due to the relative lack of understanding in extant theories as to what flourishing entails as a concept (i.e. what it means). Although, for instance, Keyes (2002) asserts flourishing mental health is determined by high levels of psychological, subjective, and social wellbeing, his theory does not extend to what high levels of psychological, subjective, and social wellbeing mean (particularly in any given context). By conceptualising flourishing as a concept, I was able to explore in Chapter Three some of the ways students understand this concept and attach to it certain context-specific meanings. The notions of flourishing as including academic and social engagement in university settings, as entailing academic success or learning, or as being a form of personal growth or self-actualisation may be given as examples of the ways flourishing was contextualised when conceptualised as a concept.

Despite the relative novelty and usefulness of the understandings I obtained in the work in Chapter Three, I acknowledge, and indeed endorse, that flourishing could be conceptualised in ways other than as a concept as may be theoretically necessary or of interest to a researcher. Conceptualisation of flourishing in alternative ways will lead to it being contextualised in different ways. An example may help clarify this. Say I were to conceptualise flourishing as a social practice rather than as a concept. In Chapter One I mentioned Ryff and Singer’s (1998) discussion of the ways African communities practice wellbeing. They argue that the notion of wellbeing is not internalised or individualistic in these communities, but is instead existent between and

among community members. Members create wellbeing by engaging in an array of social practices that have shared meanings in the context of their culture, such as community celebrations, reciprocal, community-oriented, and hierarchical relationships, obedience of elders, giving of advice to young members, and service and respect for the preservation of community culture and norms (Mbiti, 1970; Paris, 1995). Thus, notions such as flourishing or wellbeing can be contextualised in different ways depending on how they are conceptualised. As a concept, flourishing may entail a variety of personal qualities and characteristics (e.g. engagement, diligence, optimism, determination). As a social practice, it may entail a variety of behaviours conducted between and among individuals within communities of practice (Mbiti, 1970; Paris, 1995; cf. Lave, 1988; Wenger, 1998).

There are many other possible ways of conceptualising flourishing. Some examples are given in Figure 6.1 (p. 226), though I believe I have articulated my point here sufficiently and will not go into further detail on these.

#### **6.3.1.2. Measurement**

Similar to conceptualisation, there are multiple possible ways in which flourishing may be measured (see Figure 6.1, p. 226). Here, my reference to the term “measurement” is broad and may include forms of measurement that are not empirical, or indeed no formal measurement at all. In this thesis, the form of measurement I developed to assess flourishing was psychometric (see Chapter Four). As I discussed throughout Chapter Four, psychometrics entails certain traditions, or conventional requirements (such as internal consistency or convergent validity), to contribute to the production of statistically reliable and conceptually valid assessment tools (Kline, 1998, 2000). Adherence to such traditions or conventional requirements necessarily produces a flourishing that is contextualised in a particular way. In the example of the SOFIA, adherence to a psychometric framework for contextualised measurement of flourishing led to a measure that accounted for certain socially constructed aspects of flourishing in higher education (e.g. positive orientation to university) but not others (e.g. social engagement). Such adherence also dictated that flourishing in higher education must resemble, to a certain degree, other measures of aspects of flourishing (e.g. through convergent validity assessment) and must not contain dimensions that are contradictory to one another, at least statistically (e.g. in internal consistency reliability assessment).

Measurement of flourishing in ways other than psychometric will necessarily lead to it being contextualised in different ways. For example, developmetric assessment would stem from the conceptualisation of flourishing as a developmental

process (similar to Benson and Scales' [2009] conception of thriving) and may involve assessment strategies that differ from or supplement psychometric ones, such as teacher/instructor ratings of student flourishing. Also, apart from different ways of measuring flourishing, some researchers may reason that for flourishing to be contextualised most effectively, no formal (i.e. operationalised) measurement may be desirable. For example, Suissa (2008) questions the utility of psychometric measures of wellbeing and argues that they cannot account for the full conceptual breadth and depth of wellbeing. She contends that there is need for philosophical inquiry into wellbeing in order to assess it at a deeper level.

Again, other examples of the ways flourishing may be measured in context are given in Figure 6.1 (p. 226), but I will not go into further detail here.

### **6.3.1.3. Context(s) in which flourishing occurs**

The way flourishing is contextualised is, I argue, thoroughly dependent upon the contexts in which it is considered (see Figure 6.1, p. 226). This argument may seem obvious, however, as I noted in Chapter One, some positive psychologists recognise that the attention given in the discipline to the role of contexts (or environments) in flourishing is still limited today (e.g. Biswas-Diener, 2011). In the present thesis, I considered flourishing in the context of higher education. In so doing, my research was oriented towards university students and the ways they understand and characterise flourishing in university settings. However, as I attempted to show in Chapter Five, higher education represents only the immediate context of flourishing in this case, and there is a need to recognise the role of the "wider context" within which higher education operates, as these too may be potentially influential over flourishing in higher education. Thus, higher education may be determined as operating within an economic context (e.g. state funding reductions, global economic downturn), a political context (e.g. introduction of certain policies), a cultural context (e.g. changing legitimacy of free market ideologies in higher education, development of student consumer culture), etc. Within the proposed theoretical framework I would argue that the particular immediate and wider contexts in which flourishing is considered may reasonably be expected to have direct or indirect influences on the nature of such flourishing. Thus, the contexts within which flourishing occurs will cause flourishing to be contextualised in particular, unique ways.

### **6.3.2. Ways flourishing may be understood in context**

The second dimension of the proposed theoretical framework for context-specific flourishing differs from the first, discussed above, in that the first describes how

flourishing is contextualised in different ways, while the second suggests ways of understanding the different ways flourishing is contextualised (although the two dimensions are, as I will argue shortly, inherently connected). The components of the “ways flourishing may be understood in context” dimension of the proposed theoretical framework relate to ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues in understanding flourishing in context. I offer some explanation of each of these below.

#### **6.3.2.1. Ontological issues**

I discussed some of the ontological problems in positive psychology and positive education at length in Chapters One and Two, respectively, drawing on the arguments in favour of a relational approach made by Slife and Richardson (2008). The ontological perspective one elects to adopt might be regarded as a sort of “lens” or “window” through which flourishing appears when it is considered. Dependent upon the nature and assumptions of the ontological perspective adopted, I argue, flourishing can be understood more or less effectively for a given purpose.

In Figure 6.1 (p. 226), I give the examples of considering flourishing-in-context using abstractionist, relativist, and relational ontological perspectives. As I argued in Chapter One, there are some sound reasons for adopting a relational perspective when considering flourishing, namely that it addresses many of the problems posed by abstractionist perspectives (e.g. neglect of context) whilst avoiding some of the questionable implications of relativism (e.g. difficulty in establishing moral standards). My research and arguments throughout this thesis generally follow a relational approach (similar to that suggested by de Ruyter, 2004, and Younkins, 2008).

Using a relational approach, I argued in Chapter Three, for instance, that flourishing in the context of higher education has some characteristics that are “the same” as generic characteristics of flourishing suggested by extant positive psychological theories, but simultaneously flourishing in higher education also exhibits some contextualised “versions” of these generic characteristics, and some characteristics not accounted for by extant theories that are relatively unique to higher education. Thus, the use of a relational approach to understanding flourishing in the present thesis could be argued to have been appropriate as it allowed many of the contextual details of flourishing in higher education to be explored whilst recognising that the concept still has a degree of coherence across other contexts and in general. Building on this example I argue in the proposed theoretical framework that there is a need to consider ontological perspective when researching flourishing in contexts as this

may have a significant role in how flourishing is understood (Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008; cf. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001).

#### **6.3.2.2. Epistemological issues**

The role of epistemological perspectives in my proposed theoretical framework is similar to the role of ontological perspectives, and therefore I need not discuss these in excessive detail. The epistemological perspective adopted dictates the way flourishing is understood, i.e. the type of knowledge one obtains or develops with regard to flourishing. The examples in Figure 6.1 (p. 226) suggest possible sources of knowledge on flourishing-in-context. Which one(s) is/are adopted will lead to differences in how flourishing is understood in a given context.

In Chapter Three, I adopted a broadly social constructionist epistemological position (Burr, 2003), arguing that it is more valid to explore conceptualisations of flourishing-in-content by exploring flourishing as it is conceptualised by people in that context (in this case, students in higher education settings) than to attempt to understand flourishing-in-context by, say, adapting a generic theory of flourishing to be applicable to the context according to what empirical literature dictates. In Chapters Four and Five, though, there were some empirical epistemological elements in my approach, such as using the “theory” of flourishing in higher education developed inductively in Chapter Three as a basis for exploratory empirical work.

Other possible epistemological positions on flourishing-in-context may include drawing on knowledge from theoretical or empirical literature (for example within positive psychology) or conducting philosophical inquiry (as suggested by Suissa, 2008).

#### **6.3.2.3. Methodological issues**

Similar to ontological and epistemological approaches, the type(s) of methodology used in researching flourishing-in-context have a bearing upon how effectively flourishing is understood in the context of interest. I began the research in this thesis with a qualitative methodology: qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Using this methodology allowed flourishing in higher education to be construed, as I detailed in Chapter Three, as relatively specific, contextualised groups of conceptual categories that bring together similar understandings offered by students. But what if, for example, in-depth interviews had been carried out instead of using questionnaire-based textual data? Or what if analysis had been conducted with discourse analysis instead of qualitative content analysis? These are likely to have construed flourishing in higher education differently, for example by highlighting common

discourses students tend to draw upon when talking about flourishing in higher education and using language to construct and negotiate their understandings of it.

### **6.3.3. Synthesising the components of the framework**

Although the discussion above examines each of the dimensions and components of the proposed theoretical framework separately, it is important to point out that they may be regarded as interacting and determining one another (this is represented, I concede somewhat ambiguously, by the connecting oval in the centre of Figure 6.1, p. 226). An example of this may be the way in which conceptualisation connects with measurement. I argued in Chapter Four that the way one measures flourishing in a given context necessarily draws on the way one conceptualises it. Thus, the items written for and later included in the SOFIA were an outgrowth of the concepts and categories relating to flourishing in higher education that were developed inductively in the content analytic study in Chapter Three. Another example may be the way in which conceptualisation connects with epistemological and methodological approaches. If I conceptualise flourishing as, say, an experience, the subjective nature of experiences may lead me to adopt a phenomenological epistemological position, which in turn may inform the adoption of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) as an appropriate methodology for researching flourishing. The components of the proposed framework are thus part of a whole and, although I divide them here for purposes of clarity and discussion, cannot be separated from other another in practice.

### **6.3.4. Utility of the framework**

The proposed theoretical framework for context-specific flourishing may have practical utility in two key ways. Firstly, although the framework derives from the arguments and research presented in this thesis for flourishing in higher education, its dimensions and components recognise possibilities for understanding flourishing in contexts other than higher education narrowly defined, meaning the framework could be used to inform research and inquiry into context-specific flourishing in a diverse range of applied settings. I would argue this versatility is a strength and may be used to contribute to greater awareness and exploration of context-specificity in flourishing and other wellbeing-related concepts in positive psychology.

A second strength of the proposed framework is its contribution to addressing the key gap in positive psychology theory and research that I highlighted in Chapter One. This gap relates to a relative lack of recognition of the role of context in the nature of flourishing and in our ability to understand it. Because the framework explicitly recognises the diversity both in the ways flourishing may be contextualised and in the

ways it can be understood in context, I would argue it constitutes one possible way this gap can be filled.

Considered as a whole, positive psychologists and other theorists and researchers using the proposed framework would be able to consider multiple dimensions and issues in the complex ways flourishing is contextualised in applied settings. This, it is hoped, would lead to much research in positive psychology, particularly its applied domains such as positive education, to develop theory and programmes that are more directly informed by (people and stakeholders in) contexts rather than developed and applied in a top-down fashion.

Having proposed a theoretical framework for context-specific flourishing, I will now turn to general discussion of the thesis as a whole.

## **6.4. Strengths, limitations, and directions for future research**

In this section I will consider some of the strengths and limitations of this thesis as a whole and, where applicable, make suggestions for future research in the area of context-specific flourishing.

### **6.4.1. Did the thesis achieve its purpose?**

On the whole, the thesis may be said to have achieved its purpose in the sense that it obtained initial answers to the research questions posed and met its original aims. However, it should be noted that, as has been repeated throughout the thesis, this work is intended to be both preliminary and exploratory. Given this, and given the newness of the notion of contextualised wellbeing in positive psychology (Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008), although answers to my research questions were obtained, I would not claim these are exhaustive, or, indeed, finite.<sup>49</sup> Instead, they constitute a positive initial contribution to future research in flourishing and student wellbeing in educational settings.

The thesis could also be argued to have raised more questions than it has answered. For example, each of the three dimensions of contextlessness in flourishing posed in Chapter One was answered in Chapters Three, Four, and Five, respectively in some degree of detail. I would argue this degree of detail was sufficient for the purposes of the thesis, however further exploration and development of the research may be

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<sup>49</sup> This is particularly the case with qualitative research such as was conducted in Chapter Three. In the majority of qualitative methodologies, including qualitative content analysis, data analysis is considered potentially infinite and is stopped at a point of theoretical saturation rather than due to “completion” (Weaver & Atkinson, 1994).

required in the future. Examples of such further work appear in some of the next sections.

#### **6.4.2. Context: Blessing or curse?**

The overall argument of this thesis was that flourishing must be considered in context, especially in order for practical applications of flourishing research – such as in education – to be contextually relevant and meaningful (cf. Wang, 2008). Considering flourishing in context could be argued to be both a blessing and a curse. I previously argued that a limitation of existing positive psychological theories of flourishing was their generic nature – what Slife and Richardson (2008) call “abstractionism.” Such theories’ inability to be contextualised on the basis of context-specific evidence (rather than taking a theoretical stab in the dark and assuming a top-down theoretical framework is wholly applicable to the context) presents problems for application. For example, such trial-and-error top-down applications are usually not feasible in practice because of time or funding constraints (Wang, 2008). Therefore, exploration of flourishing in the specific context of UK higher education, and developing the present preliminary theory in an inherently contextualised format, was an advantage as the manner of contextualisation is evidenced and the findings directly applicable to the context in question.

Despite the above, my contextualised theory could equally be criticised as lacking generalisability, or pragmatic utility outside of the specific context in and for which it was developed. How can we know that, for example, consideration of political influences is always relevant and necessary when researching flourishing in a given context? This would be a valid criticism. The key question here is perhaps how a balance between contextualisation and generality can be established that allows both contextual meaning to be clear and relevant and a reasonable degree of generalisability to be possible for application of the theory to appropriate wider contexts. How to negotiate this trade-off is obviously a complex challenge. Since the present theory was developed in a context, we might first ask what this specific context was and to what degree it might allow my theory to be generalised (decontextualised) for application outside of the original context. The theory’s original contexts might be listed as follows:

- The specific institutions used for data collection;
- The specific students in both the initial and subsequent samples;
- The UK as a wider sphere of cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts;
- Higher education as a life domain;

- The global economy;
- Global trends in higher education; and
- Other contexts.

It is likely that it would be unwise to assume that the present theory – even if developed further – can be used for application in an absolute sense, that is, to all students, institutions, and cultural settings, and to all historical eras. This would both overestimate the utility of the theory and be antithetical to the thesis’ argument that contextual specificity should be maintained. However, one might reasonably assume the theory may be relevant for application to most students at most institutions in the UK in the years ahead. Also, exploration of the SOFIA in the Australian and New Zealand samples in Chapter Four suggests the SOFIA on its own is a relevant measurement tool for application in those cultural/academic settings, and so it may be feasible to develop the theory as a whole among students there.

Overall, the contextualised nature of the theory has both strengths and limitations and should be considered and applied with this caveat. Future research in this area could explore the construction of flourishing in other academic and/or higher education settings (e.g. non-Western, non-individualistic settings or higher education cultures which differ significantly from that of the UK, such as Bhutan; see Ura et al., 2010) to ascertain whether flourishing is constructed/practiced in a way similar to that illustrated in Chapter Three (also, cf. Lu & Shih, 1997). Comparison of different constructions of flourishing across different higher education cultures could lead to the development of the present theory to include new components (e.g. in conceptualisation) or to creation of new, complementary context-specific theories relevant to such settings. This would also help assess the exact degree of applicability of the present theory.

#### **6.4.3. “Piecemeal” approach to developing the theory**

The present thesis addressed three aspects of contextlessness apparent in existing positive psychological theories of flourishing, with regard to conceptualisation, measurement, and relationships with other factors (Slife & Richardson, 2008). This was justified in Chapter One as presenting an initial attempt to contextualise flourishing at a number of different levels rather than just one. This illustrates that the problem of contextlessness manifests at ontological, epistemological, and methodological levels and in multiple ways in theories of wellbeing. In other words, the problem is not isolated to just one aspect of a theory. In this sense the “three-pronged” approach to theory development (conceptualisation, measurement, contextualisation) was a strength

in that it allowed me to explore and demonstrate a contextualised (relational) alternative way of theorising about flourishing for development into a preliminary theory.

An argument against the three-pronged approach is that the explorations in any of the three areas of contextlessness addressed in this thesis remain preliminary – or “piecemeal” – and could have been developed to a greater degree of detail at the exclusion of the other two. For example, the first area, developing a context-specific conceptualisation of flourishing in higher education, could have been explored in greater depth with the use of richer interview data and a more in-depth qualitative methodology such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), as has been done with other positive psychology constructs that had previously been solely examined using, say, empirical approaches (such as the construct of post-traumatic growth; Hefferon, Grealy & Mutrie, 2009). This could have led to an in-depth, more developed, and potentially more readily useable theory of one aspect of flourishing in higher education, rather than the wider theoretical framework I have proposed. This limitation of the work is acknowledged, along with the opportunity for future research to address each of the separate aspects of contextlessness examined herein both individually and in greater theoretical depth, as each of the aspects would lend themselves favourably to development as specialised threads of research. Suggestions for further development of the other two areas of contextlessness might be as follows:

*Measurement.* Future research would focus primarily on further development of the SOFIA. For example, this may include assessment of the SOFIA’s predictive validity (DeVon, Block, Moyle-Wright, Ernst, Hayden, Lazzara et al., 2007) and further validation using a multi-method approach such as acquaintance ratings or behavioural measurement methods (Campbell & Fiske, 1959), searching for explanations of the modest test-retest reliability observed in Chapter Four, and exploration in diverse cultural settings. This would lead to the creation of a more fully valid and reliable SOFIA tool, and to more complete knowledge of the current prevalence of flourishing in higher education across different demographic and other groups/social strata, population norms, and trends in flourishing over time. I must reiterate, though, that work must be conducted in combination with, and complementary to, non-psychometric and non-empirical methods of assessing flourishing in higher education.

*Contextualisation among other factors.* Both extension of quantitative and initiation of qualitative work in the contextualisation aspect of contextlessness are possible. Research focusing on this particular area individually should explore the relationship between aspects of flourishing and aspects of student consumerism further,

looking at possible reasons why an inverse relationship appears to exist (e.g. whether the theoretical explanation given in Chapter Five can be supported with evidence, such as through investigation of mediating or moderating factors between the two). This would add to our understanding of how wider cultures in higher education (such as the culture of consumerism; Fairchild et al., 2005) may be changed to be more congruent with an ethos oriented towards active, self-directed learning and flourishing rather than mere satisfaction of consumerist expectations. The factors of trust in government and political leftism, which showed an interesting relationship with flourishing in Chapter Five, also warrant further exploration. It is worthwhile to note that while research on student consumerism and on the relationship between political attitudes/behaviours and wellbeing remains minimal, what does exist is almost exclusively quantitative-focused (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild et al., 2007), so these suggestions apply equally to future qualitative-oriented research as to quantitative (cf. White, 2007).

Overall, whilst the present work can be criticised for its “piecemeal” approach to developing the theory, I argue the approach is justified in terms of its congruence with the original purpose of the thesis – to explore flourishing in context at multiple levels – and in that sense the thesis could be taken to constitute a “scoping study” of sorts. This should be taken with the acknowledgement that future research as above would be useful in developing each strand of this work more completely.

#### **6.4.4. Evaluating the quality of the proposed theory**

As known, the social constructionist assumptions on which the development of the present theory was based began with the work reported in Chapter Three, in which I attempted to develop a conceptualisation of students’ understandings of flourishing as pertaining to higher education. It was upon this conceptualisation that the later work in the thesis, including the present proposed theory, was based. Thus, it should be acknowledged that much of the theoretical quality of the proposed theory rests upon the quality of this conceptualisation. As was discussed in Chapter Three, a number of justifications can be made for using both the sample (the 222 students who participated in the study) and the methodology (qualitative content analysis; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) from which that conceptualisation was derived. When these are added to the checks made for quality of the content analysis, it may reasonably be argued that the initial conceptualisation is sufficiently valid for the proposed theory also to possess reasonable quality, although it is difficult to judge the precise degree of quality a theory should have in order to be confidently utilised in application. So, in conclusion, the quality of the proposed theory reaches only so far as

the conceptualisation of flourishing in higher education constructed in Chapter Three, and this should be recognised as the scope, or boundary, within which the theory is proposed.

#### **6.4.5. Preliminary nature of the theory**

The preliminary nature of the proposed theory of flourishing in higher education was mentioned in Chapter Two. Few theories in the social sciences have been developed in their entirety within a single body of work – indeed most develop over decades of research contributed from multiple perspectives and may change with the historical milieu (e.g. self-determination theory [Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000]). Thus, whilst the present thesis sought to “develop a theory,” this was consciously qualified with “preliminary” in recognition of this. Whilst the thesis makes some valuable contributions to the development of a context-specific theory of flourishing (as discussed throughout the thesis), it should be acknowledged that the nature of the proposed theory is preliminary.

The preliminary nature of the theory includes the depth of the understanding of flourishing constructed. For example, in Chapter Three I assumed that flourishing is a broad group of socially constructed conceptualisations, but the proposed theory could have been developed differently by researching flourishing as an experience, a discourse, or a social practice. The proposed theory is also preliminary in terms of the interrelationships between flourishing and contextual influences. For example, in Chapter Five I focused on consumerist attitudes and several political and economic factors as potential influences over flourishing, but there is huge scope for investigation of other contextual factors, such as religious or historical.

The preliminary nature of the theory may be considered a limitation in terms of its utility for immediate practical application in higher education policy or professional practice. Given the current economic climate, public policy and education-based positive psychological interventions based on the work in the present thesis may be unlikely to attract appropriate funding support for practical implementation and assessment without more comprehensive elaboration of its theoretical basis.

#### **6.4.6. Unanswered questions about flourishing**

There are several questions that arise from and/or remain unanswered by this thesis.

- *What can policymakers, students, and/or educators do to enhance flourishing in higher education?*

Although this thesis addresses the questions of what flourishing means to students in higher education and how it is positioned among other contextual

variables, it did not extend to considering how flourishing may be enhanced. Yet the enhancement of flourishing must be a worthwhile pursuit if one recalls the initial assumption from which this thesis began: that flourishing is an educational ideal (de Ruyter, 2004). Research in the future – both empirical and otherwise – is called for to address this question.

- *What might a “flourishing-oriented higher education system” look like?*

Another question to which this thesis did not extend was how a university or higher education system oriented towards student flourishing might be conceptualised. I reviewed some of the few papers addressing this question in Chapter Two (e.g. Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009). Although these papers make a useful initial contribution to the discussion of designing universities and educational institutions for human flourishing, I highlighted in Chapter Two a number of problems that remain, and more consideration of how these could be rectified would lead to real-world applications of flourishing-oriented universities in the future.

- *How would a similar preliminary theoretical exploration to the one conducted here conceive of flourishing in different higher education contexts?*

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, context may be both a blessing and a curse. It is necessary to recognise that, with the exception of cross-cultural validity work conducted on the SOFIA in Australia and New Zealand, the present thesis was prepared in the context of UK higher education. How flourishing may be construed in (radically) different higher education contexts remains an open question.

- *How can we best negotiate the trade-off between generic/contextless or “universal” theories of wellbeing and contextualised ones?*

In this thesis I argued against some aspects of existing positive psychological theories of flourishing – for example, their abstractionist ontological perspective and their lack of consideration of contextual influences on flourishing. However, I also noted in Chapter One that I did not intend to invalidate these theories as they also make useful contributions to positive psychology theory and practice (e.g. developments in modelling flourishing and assessing prevalence of mental health). Therefore, it seems logical that generic/abstract theories could be merged or reconciled in some way with context-specific ones. How this could be achieved may be an interesting avenue of pursuit for future research.

- *How can flourishing be contextualised in ways other than as a socially constructed concept/idea, as has been done here (experience/discourse/social practice)?*

A final question unanswered by this thesis concerns the possibility for flourishing to be conceptualised in ways other than as a concept. I gave the example earlier of flourishing as a form of social practice in collectivistic African communities. Exploration of diverse notions of flourishing would require not just further research within positive psychology, but perhaps also a greater degree of integration between positive psychology and other social sciences. There is already some interest in social science in topics of flourishing and wellbeing, such as in sociology (e.g. Sointu, 2005) and anthropology (e.g. Fischer, 2010).

## **6.5. Utilisation of this thesis**

### **6.5.1. Caveats**

In this section I will consider the ways in which the work in this thesis may be utilised in practice. Two caveats should briefly be noted. Firstly, although this section is last, it has significance because, despite its theoretical nature, the thesis was primarily intended to inform practical applications in educational contexts. Secondly, in making the below considerations, I do not seek to suggest that the work in this thesis is “complete” or developed sufficiently to inform higher education policy or practice on its own; rather, it should be understood to contribute to change in conjunction with other endeavours to contextualise wellbeing, not singularly constitute it.

In this section I will suggest how this thesis may be utilised in two areas: education policy and positive education.

### **6.5.2. Education policy and flourishing in higher education**

#### **6.5.2.1. Evaluating current policy**

As noted in Chapter Five, some policy currently under implementation in the higher education sector (both in the UK and elsewhere) appears to be incongruent with a purpose of education that includes human flourishing. For example, the new higher-rate tuition fee policy affecting most domestic undergraduate students in England was argued to be antithetical to student flourishing on the basis of a number of pieces of evidence in both theoretical and empirical literature (Bolton, 2012; see Chapter Five). Further, student consumerist attitudes developing alongside the implementation of such policies (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Fairchild et al., 2007) were found to differentiate

reasonably reliably between “high-flourishing” and “low-flourishing” students (as assessed by the SOFIA), suggesting that policies which (however inadvertently) encourage consumerism on the part of students may need to be reviewed in terms of their usefulness in achieving holistic student wellbeing both inside and outside the context of higher education. Thus, the findings reported in Chapter Five may be utilised in conducting evaluations of currently implemented education policy (e.g. Bolton, 2012) in the domain of higher education to assess the degree of congruence between policy and the ideals pursued. Such an evaluation may be, for example, conducting a longitudinal evaluation of possible long-term changes in students’ flourishing over the course of the implementation of the new tuition fee policy, or accumulating time-series data over the course of several years to examine year-on-year trends in flourishing and contextual factors such as student consumerist attitudes, trust in government, and political ideologies. These pursuits may also utilise the SOFIA to aid practical assessment of flourishing in the context of higher education.

#### **6.5.2.2. Informing future policy**

Further to the above suggestion for evaluating existing education policy for its congruence with, and contribution to, the potential of students to flourish, both Chapter Four and Five outputs may be useful in the development, piloting, assessment, and implementation of future education policy targeted at higher education contexts. Specifically, policies such as the increased tuition fee cap for undergraduates in England (Bolton, 2012) may be reviewed or reformed in future on the basis of the need to align future policy with the conditions (including cultural and practical, rather than merely economic) required to maximise students’ potential to flourish at university. This may be done by developing new funding systems for higher education students through consultation with wellbeing researchers (e.g. Aked & Thompson, 2011) and on the basis of contextualised understandings of flourishing such as the present one (see Chapter Three), assessing the influence of such policy on students’ flourishing using both global-level and context-specific measurement tools (e.g. the SOFIA), and subsequently implementing new policies which align with and contribute to student flourishing.

### **6.5.3. “Positive higher education”**

#### **6.5.3.1. Flourishing as an ideal in positive education**

As I stated at the beginning of Chapter One, the main assumption on which the work in this thesis was based is that human flourishing is an ideal worthy of adoption and pursuit in the domain of education (e.g. de Ruyter, 2004). Whilst flourishing has also now been identified as the underlying aim of both positive psychology and positive

education (Green et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011), there is still a degree of ambiguity on what constitutes flourishing in educational settings, particularly in terms of context-level (“grassroots”) understandings and the way flourishing manifests behaviourally (the way it is “practiced”) in everyday classroom situations. In addition, the top-down contextualisation of generic theories of flourishing for educational purposes largely fails to provide an appropriately contextualised meaning, definition, or understanding of this term because of the basis of such theories in arbitrarily selected theoretical literature (e.g. Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). Thus, the broad groups of understandings of flourishing-in-context for higher education settings described in this thesis may contribute to addressing this shortcoming by defining what one means when one says students should be enabled to “flourish” at university. As noted in Chapter One, this does not suggest that each individual will flourish in precisely the same manner, but rather that, following a relational ontological perspective (Slife & Richardson, 2008), certain overarching “goods” in educational settings can be identified and explained by students with a reasonable degree of consensus. These goods are contextualised in a manner appropriate to the higher education context in which both students and educators operate, thus constituting an idea of what flourishing in higher education might be like. The understandings of flourishing in higher education developed in this thesis may therefore be utilised in positive education researchers and practitioners to clarify the aims of positive education programmes (e.g. Oades et al.’s [2011] notion of the positive university or Schreiner et al.’s [2009] suggestions for positive psychology on university campuses) and tailor such programmes more specifically to helping students achieve flourishing that is directly relevant to, and contextualised in, educational settings.

#### **6.5.3.2. Using flourishing to develop positive higher education programmes**

As discussed in Chapter Two, positive education programmes have, to use a cliché, flourished since the Penn Resiliency Program (Gillham et al., 1990) was developed in the 1980s. Particularly in the last decade, positive education programmes, interventions, and stand-alone curricula and courses have been successfully implemented across both primary and secondary schools in many countries (Green et al., 2011; Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). However, in higher education, the scope of positive education initiatives is much narrower, and largely such initiatives have been limited to theoretical commentaries (e.g. Magyar-Moe, 2011; Oades et al., 2011; Schreiner et al., 2009). Whilst the present thesis, similar to these commentaries, remains theoretical in nature, its components have potential to be actively used to inform the

development of pilot programmes aimed at enhancing flourishing in university students. For example, this may include teaching students about positive psychological and other research on flourishing/wellbeing in a wider scope of application than MAPP or psychology students alone – in other words, integrating flourishing research into everyday teaching and professional practice in higher education (i.e. a whole-institution extension of the suggestions Magyar-Moe [2011] makes regarding the teaching of positive psychology in mainstream psychology courses). Another example of applying the work in this thesis may be changing teaching and learning methods to emphasise the characteristics of flourishing students (as described in Chapter Three), rather than the characteristics of passive or consumerist learners. This could be carried out through a review of the “student as customer” marketing models widely in used in the UK higher education sector (Acevedo, 2011; Schwartzman, 1995). Such a review may aim to establish the degree to which such models encourage or promote student consumerist attitudes and to develop ways of encouraging and promoting self-directed student flourishing using the understandings of student flourishing developed in this thesis.

## **6.6. Concluding remarks**

In this thesis I have aimed to conduct and present a series of preliminary exploratory studies aimed at developing an understanding of the notion of “flourishing” in the context of higher education. Many existing theories of flourishing within positive psychology are generic in nature and do not offer understandings of flourishing in specific contexts that are derived inductively from such contexts. I have attempted to address this gap by exploring some of the meanings, measurement strategies, and public policy implications of flourishing in higher education. Apart from offering unique, context-specific insight into how flourishing may be construed in higher education as a specialised domain, the research in this thesis also led to the proposition of a preliminary theoretical framework that may be used by positive psychologists and other theorists and practitioners in the area of flourishing to more explicitly consider the complex roles contexts play in the ways flourishing is both contextualised (context-specific in nature) and can be understood and researched as such. It is hoped that the work in this thesis will serve to increase awareness of the importance of context within the discipline of positive psychology, both on the topic of flourishing and on wellbeing and optimal functioning in general.

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# APPENDIX A: ETHICAL APPROVAL



Ms Elizabeth Attree  
School of Psychology  
Stratford

ETH/13/56

14 March 2011

Dear Elizabeth,

**Application to the Research Ethics Committee: Three Preliminary Investigations into the Nature and Measurement of Flourishing in Higher Education and its Relationship with Student Consumerism (N Gokcen)**

I advise that Members of the Research Ethics Committee have now approved the above application on the terms previously advised to you. The Research Ethics Committee should be informed of any significant changes that take place after approval has been given. Examples of such changes include any change to the scope, methodology or composition of investigative team. These examples are not exclusive and the person responsible for the programme must exercise proper judgement in determining what should be brought to the attention of the Committee.

In accepting the terms previously advised to you I would be grateful if you could return the declaration form below, duly signed and dated, confirming that you will inform the committee of any changes to your approved programme.

Yours sincerely

Debbie Dada  
Admissions and Ethics Officer  
Direct Line: 0208 223 2976  
Email: d.dada@uel.ac.uk

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**Research Ethics Committee: ETH/13/56**

I hereby agree to inform the Research Ethics Committee of any changes to be made to the above approved programme and any adverse incidents that arise during the conduct of the programme.

Signed:.....Date: .....

Please Print Name:

# APPENDIX B: INFORMATION SHEET FOR CONTENT ANALYTIC STUDY

## University of East London

Water Lane, Stratford, London, E15 4LZ

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

### **University Research Ethics Committee**

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact the Secretary of the University Research Ethics Committee, Mr Merlin Harries, University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD (Tel 020 8223 2009, Email: [m.harries@uel.ac.uk](mailto:m.harries@uel.ac.uk))

<p><b>The Principal Investigator</b> Elizabeth A. Attree School of Psychology University of East London Water Lane, Stratford London E15 4LZ Tel. 020 8223 4461 Email: <a href="mailto:e.a.attree@uel.ac.uk">e.a.attree@uel.ac.uk</a></p>	<p><b>The Researcher</b> Nesrin Gokcen School of Psychology University of East London Water Lane, Stratford London E15 4LZ Tel. 020 8223 4431 Email: <a href="mailto:n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk">n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk</a></p>
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### **Project Title**

Three Preliminary Investigations into the Nature and Measurement of Flourishing in Higher Education and its Relationship with Student Consumerism

### **Project Description**

This study aims to investigate the concept of flourishing in Higher Education and the characteristics of flourishing students. Your participation in this study will involve completing the attached questionnaire. Participating does not involve any risk or hazard to yourself.

### **Confidentiality of the Data**

Your data will be kept on a password-protected computer in a secure office in the School of Psychology. Only the Researcher and examiners will have access to your data. All data will be destroyed or deleted upon completion and write-up of the research.

### **Disclaimer**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to withdraw without disadvantage to yourself and without obligation to give a reason. Should you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact the Researcher ([n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk)) quoting the Reference Number at the bottom of this page. The deadline for requesting withdrawal is **30 June 2011**, after which the study will be written up.

Reference No. \_\_\_\_\_

# APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM FOR CONTENT ANALYTIC STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

## Consent to Participate in an Experimental Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants

### Three Preliminary Investigations into the Nature and Measurement of Flourishing in Higher Education and its Relationship with Student Consumerism

I have read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the experimental programme has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me.

Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS): .....

Participant's Student Number: .....

Participant's Signature: .....

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS): .....

Researcher's Signature: .....

Date: .....



## APPENDIX E: EXPERT RATING FORM

### Rating Form for Subject Matter Experts

Thank you for agreeing to help with this project. This research is concerned with the concept of *flourishing*. Specifically, we are interested in how students flourish in Higher Education in the UK and the way(s) they understand flourishing in the academic environment. The research aims to construct a valid and reliable scale that measures flourishing in British Higher Education and then to investigate what the predictors, correlates and implications of flourishing may be within a British Higher Education context, with particular reference to student consumerism and consumerist attitudes towards Higher Education in the UK.

We feel that flourishing is a concept still under-developed in the area of positive psychology. Although the term is used by a variety of researchers (Keyes, Fredrickson, Diener, etc.), it has not yet properly been defined conceptually or operationally, especially in our area of interest (Higher Education). Therefore, we have used inductive approaches to gain an understanding of flourishing in addition to existing knowledge in the flourishing literature.

Currently, we have generated an initial item pool for our 'flourishing in higher education' scale. The items were informed by actual written qualitative data collected from university students earlier in the programme of research (if desired, please see the attached conference paper for details of that study). In order to evaluate the content validity of the scale, ratings of item suitability and subscale relevance are required from Subject Matter Experts with expertise in the areas of positive psychology and Higher Education.

Your assistance with this part of the research is much appreciated. We recognise that this document is somewhat long; however, the majority of the work involves entering number ratings from a Likert scale and should therefore (hopefully!) be not too laborious. The document is divided into three sections (item ratings, subscale ratings, and additional comments). Please email the completed document to [n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk) as soon as possible (ideally by 31 August 2011).  
Very many thanks.

Nesrin Gokcen

Elizabeth Attree

Christine Dancey

Kate Hefferon

## **Note on Conceptual Subscales used in this item pool:**

Based on the initial inductive study in the research, seven conceptual subscales of the construct ‘flourishing in higher education’ were developed.

### **Self actualisation and progress**

Our study developed self actualisation as referring to personal growth (self-improvement or ‘getting better’ as a person), development, and ideas of reaching for or achieving one’s personal potential at university. This subscale also includes making progress in one’s studies and having a sense of ‘blooming’ or ‘thriving’ in academia.

### **Success and achievement**

This subscale was developed from ideas of extrinsic indicators of academic success such as achievement of high grades on coursework and exams, generally ‘doing well’, achieving set goals or targets at university, and taking up academic challenges and opportunities. This subscale also included being ambitious in relation to academic work and achievement.

### **Subjective wellbeing**

Positive affect was conceptualised as having a range of positive emotions in relation to university and academic work. These were primarily happiness, satisfaction and contentment with one’s chosen course or academic career path. However, this subscale also encompassed other areas of hedonic wellbeing such as enjoyment (of learning or studying) and affection (liking) towards engaging with academic work. Ideas of the absence of negative emotions (frustration, stress, confusion, depression) were also prominent.

### **Vitality**

The subscale of vitality emerged from ideas about feeling energetic, motivated, and confident about university studies and approaching academic work with determination or a positive ‘can do’ attitude.

### **Commitment to learning**

Commitment to learning encompassed openness and focus in learning. ‘Openness’ referred to possessing characteristics such as curiosity, willingness/interest, and enthusiasm in relation to learning, while ‘focus’ was conceptualised as being a ‘hard worker’, being serious, competent, organised and disciplined in one’s approach to learning.

### **Social engagement**

Being socially engaged in the academic environment was conceptualised as maintaining good relationships with tutors and classmates, and participating in social activities such as class discussions or informal social events at university. Other facets of the subscale included friendliness and helpfulness.

### **Academic engagement**

This subscale included student behaviours demonstrating engagement with academic work and learning. These centred on punctuality and attendance at lectures, seminars and exams, good completion of coursework, meeting deadlines, and engaging in independent study of subject matter.

## Section 1: Item Ratings

In Table 1, please read each scale item in the left hand column (please note that some items were intended to be reverse coded and are therefore worded negatively). Then rate each item's suitability as a measure of *each* of the seven conceptual subscales that appear across the top row of the table. To do this, place the number that corresponds to your response in each of the empty boxes in Table 1 using the following 1-5 Likert scale:

1	2	3	4	5
The item is a completely <i>unsuitable</i> measure of the given subscale	The item is <i>not</i> a very suitable measure of the given subscale	Unsure/unclear whether the item is a suitable measure of the given subscale	The item is a somewhat suitable measure of the given subscale	The item is a completely suitable measure of the given subscale

**Table 1. Subject Matter Expert ratings for suitability of scale items as measures of each of seven conceptual subscales of 'flourishing in higher education'.**

	SELF ACTUALISATION AND PROGRESS	SUCCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT	SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING	VITALITY	COMMIT- MENT TO LEARNING	SOCIAL ENGAGE- MENT	ACADEMIC ENGAGE- MENT
I am improving in my studies.							
I usually pass my exams with good grades.							
I don't feel that I am making progress at university.							
I am not really happy about my studies.							
The grades I obtain at university are usually above average.							
My grades are usually below average.							
I am striving to reach my full potential at university.							
I'm not doing very well on my course.							
I feel happy at university.							
I enjoy the courses I am taking.							
Most of the time, I do well in my coursework.							
Studying my subject matter is satisfying to me.							
I find my subject matter very enjoyable.							
I feel very content with the course I have chosen to study.							
I don't enjoy my course.							
I don't feel satisfied with my chosen course.							
I don't feel happy on my course.							
I am a successful student.							

I have a great deal of determination towards my studies.							
I feel motivated to learn about my subject matter.							
Studying my subject matter makes me feel alive.							
I enjoy doing assignments on my course.							
I approach my academic work with a lot of motivation.							
I feel as though I have no motivation to study.							
I am not very optimistic about my studies.							
I am determined to do well in my studies.							
I haven't succeeded much at university.							
I am very interested in the topics covered in my course.							
I feel enthusiastic about learning new things.							
I frequently ask questions about my subject matter in class.							
I want to learn as much as possible at university.							
I am keen to acquire a lot of knowledge about my subject area.							
I have a great deal of curiosity about the subject I am studying.							
I am not interested in learning new things on my course.							
I don't think my subject area is interesting.							
I don't feel confident about succeeding on my course.							
I can't seem to focus when I am studying.							
I frequently participate in social activities at university.							
I am a punctual student.							
I consider myself to be a friendly student.							
I enjoy helping others at university.							
I am eager to learn about my subject matter.							
I don't socialise much with my classmates.							
I don't see myself as a sociable student.							

I don't participate in class discussions.							
I am rarely absent from lectures.							
I always try to attend lectures.							
I often socialise with my classmates at university.							
I complete academic work on time.							
I do additional reading on my subject matter.							
I arrive at my classes on time.							
I frequently lack enthusiasm to learn.							
I often don't manage to come to lectures.							
I frequently miss deadlines for academic work.							
I don't read much about my subject matter.							
I am often late for class.							
I don't put much effort into my exams.							
I am achieving my goals at university.							
I am always willing to learn more about my subject.							
I am confident about my studies.							
I am motivated to succeed in my course.							
I always meet the deadlines for academic assignments.							
I believe that I am becoming a better person at university.							
I enjoy making friends with others at university.							
I feel that I am making progress in my studies.							
I have developed a lot at university.							
I haven't developed much at university.							
I often feel that my studies are going downhill.							
I usually get good grades in the courses I take.							
While studying at university, I have grown as a person.							

## Section 2: Subscale Ratings

Using the explanations of our conceptual subscales appearing at the top of this document, please rate the degree to which each conceptual subscale is a relevant facet (i.e. dimension) of ‘flourishing in higher education’. To do this, place the number that corresponds with your response beside each subscale in Table 2 using the following 1-5 Likert scale:

1	2	3	4	5
The given subscale is completely irrelevant to ‘flourishing in higher education’	The given subscale is not a very relevant dimension of ‘flourishing in higher education’	Unsure/unclear whether the given subscale is a relevant dimension of ‘flourishing in higher education’	The given subscale is a somewhat relevant dimension of ‘flourishing in higher education’	The given subscale is a completely relevant dimension of ‘flourishing in higher education’

**Table 2. Subject Matter Expert ratings for relevance of each of seven conceptual subscales to the intended construct ‘flourishing in higher education’.**

CONCEPTUAL SUBSCALE	RATING OF RELEVANCE TO ‘FLOURISHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION’
Self actualisation and progress	
Success and achievement	
Subjective wellbeing	
Vitality	
Commitment to learning	
Social engagement	
Academic engagement	

## Section 3: Comments/Criticisms

Finally, please take a moment to comment on the following questions.

Are there any items or subscales in the above tables that you feel should be excluded or modified? (Apart from those you have already rated as unsuitable or irrelevant).

Are there any items or subscales *not* currently in the above tables that you feel should be included? If so, please specify/exemplify?

Do you have any further comments or criticisms about the above scale items and/or conceptual subscales?

**Thanks for taking time to help with this project!**

## APPENDIX F: STAFF EMAIL REQUEST TEMPLATE

Dear [staff member's name],

Hello, I am a PhD Candidate at the School of Psychology, University of East London, UK, and am writing to ask whether you can help circulate among your students a study I am currently running.

The study concerns [phase of research being undertaken, e.g. reliability testing, validation, etc.] using the Scale of Flourishing in Academia (SOFIA), a questionnaire I am constructing which aims to measure the concept of 'flourishing' specifically in higher education students.

Input from students at your institution would be invaluable in contributing to this investigation.

The study is open to [description survey eligibility criteria – normally all students, except for main sample in Chapter Five]. It takes about 30 minutes, is conducted via a secure online survey website, and involves students completing a series of questionnaires on [brief description of specific measures used in a given study].

All data is kept in strict confidence and no individual student or institution will be identifiable within the research. The study carries the approval of the University of East London Research Ethics Committee.

Students can access the survey and more information on it by clicking on the below link (or copying and pasting it into their browser's address bar):

[Survey link]

If you are able to, may I politely request that you forward this message to any of your students or student groups who may be interested in taking part?

Please note this is a request only; if you do not wish to circulate the study to your students, you are free to decline. If you require further information before circulating the study to your students, please feel free to contact me at the email address given below.

Thank you,

Nesrin Gokcen  
PhD Candidate  
School of Psychology  
University of East London  
Water Lane, Stratford  
London  
E15 4LZ  
United Kingdom  
+44 (0)20 8223 4431  
[n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk)

# APPENDIX G: ONLINE SURVEY INFORMATION/CONSENT TEMPLATE

## Information

Thank you for your interest in taking the SOFIA [phase of research being undertaken] survey. This survey is open to [survey eligibility criteria].

This survey is based in the School of Psychology, University of East London, United Kingdom, and is part of an ongoing doctoral research programme being conducted by Nesrin Gokcen.

The SOFIA (Scale of Flourishing in Academia) is a psychometric questionnaire being developed to measure the concept of 'flourishing' specifically in university students. [Brief description of the nature of a given study, for example convergent validity testing or cross-cultural validation].

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and will involve providing non-personal demographic information about yourself and completing the SOFIA and several other questionnaires relating to [brief description of measures used]. Completing the survey takes approximately [estimate of duration]. You are free not to complete the survey if you so wish. Incomplete surveys will be deleted from our database and will not be used in our research.

Please note that at the end of the survey, you will be asked to provide a valid email address. Your email address will be stored in strict confidence and separately from your survey data for the purpose of withdrawing your data from the survey should you later request this. All email addresses and data will be permanently deleted from our database following completion of the research project and will never be shared with any third parties. Requests for the withdrawal of data should be made by [withdrawal request deadline] by emailing the lead researcher, Nesrin Gokcen, at [n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk).

Your data will be stored on secure servers in strict confidence. Please note such secure servers may be located outside the European Economic Area (EEA). Geo-location data, IP addresses, and other identifying information are not being logged by this survey.

You may request a summary report of the findings once they become available by emailing the lead researcher, Nesrin Gokcen, at [n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk). The summary report is expected to be available by [expected availability date].

If you have a query regarding the content of this survey or any aspect of the associated doctoral research, please get in touch with the lead researcher, Nesrin Gokcen, by emailing [n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.gokcen@uel.ac.uk).

This survey carries the formal approval of the University of East London Research Ethics Committee. Should you have a query regarding ethical conduct with regard to this survey, please contact Merlin Harries, University of East London Research Ethics Committee, by emailing [m.harries@uel.ac.uk](mailto:m.harries@uel.ac.uk).

This research is independent and is neither funded nor commissioned by any governmental or commercial organisation.

## Consent

I have read and understood the above information and confirm that:

- (a) I consent to participate in this survey, and
- (b) I am a student who [survey eligibility criteria]

Yes                       No

# APPENDIX H: AMENDMENT TO ETHICS APPROVAL FOR ELECTRONIC DATA COLLECTION

EXTERNAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

[uel.ac.uk/qa](http://uel.ac.uk/qa)

Quality Assurance and Enhancement



Nesrin Gokcen  
School of Psychology  
University of East London  
Water Lane, Stratford

**Date: 24 October 2011**

Dear Nesrin,

<b>Project Title:</b>	<b>Three Preliminary Investigations into the Nature and Measurement of Flourishing in Higher Education and its Relationship with Student Consumerism</b>
<b>Researcher(s):</b>	<b>Nesrin Gokcen</b>
<b>Supervisor(s):</b>	<b>Elizabeth Ann Attree</b>

I am writing to confirm that University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) have approved the proposed amendments to your research study.

Should any further significant adverse events or considerable changes occur in connection with this research project that may consequently alter relevant ethical considerations, this must be reported immediately to UREC. Subsequent to such changes an Ethical Amendment Form should be completed and submitted to UREC.

Approval is given on the understanding that the 'UEL Code of Good Practice in Research' ([www.uel.ac.uk/ga/manual/documents/codeofgoodpracticeinresearch.doc](http://www.uel.ac.uk/ga/manual/documents/codeofgoodpracticeinresearch.doc)) is adhered to.

Yours sincerely,

Merlin Harries  
University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)  
Quality Assurance and Enhancement  
Telephone: 0208-223-2009  
Email: [m.harries@uel.ac.uk](mailto:m.harries@uel.ac.uk)



# APPENDIX I: CONSUMERIST ATTITUDES TOWARDS UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION SCALE<sup>50</sup>

Scale	Factor Loadings
<b>Consumerist Orientation to Undergraduate Education</b>	
I think of my education as a product I'm buying.	.81
My relationship with university is similar to the relationship between a customer and seller.	.77
I believe most students think of their education as a product they are buying.	.52
Students should get tuition and fee reimbursement for classes they think they didn't learn anything from.	.45
I believe students should think of their education as a product they are buying.	.76
<b>Expectations of Instructors</b>	
Instructors should make sure class is interesting for students.	.72
Instructors should be required to link course material "real life."	.65
Instructors should relate well interpersonally with students.	.73
Instructors should communicate class concepts clearly.	.66
<b>Job Preparation and Performance</b>	
A good job as a result of the university education.*	.65
Counseling from the university that guides students through the process of finding a job.*	.76
Universities are responsible for providing excellent job placement services.	.78
Universities should provide an education that prepares students to enter the work force.	.67
<b>Grade Emphasis</b>	
Students shouldn't have to put a lot of effort into a course in order to get a good grade.	.54
Instructors should try to avoid harming students' GPAs with bad grades.	.60
Students should feel justified in taking a course in which they will receive an A, even if they learn little or nothing.	.54
Students should do whatever's necessary to get good grades, even if it's dishonest.	.45
Instructors should offer some classes that are "easy As."	.70
<b>Student Responsibilities</b>	
Students expect to have to put a lot of effort into a class to get a good grade.	.65
Students should study outside of class as much as necessary to learn the material.	.71
Students should pay attention during class, even if they think it's boring.	.61

Note: Response choices for items marked with an asterisk ranged from "Not Important" to "Very Important." All other items ranged from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

<sup>50</sup> Taken from Fairchild et al. (2007), p. 17.

## APPENDIX J: THE SCALE OF FLOURISHING IN ACADEMIA (SOFIA)

Below are some statements about your experiences as a university student. Please read each one carefully and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement by circling the appropriate number on the scale beside it. When responding to the statements, please think about your *overall* experience as a university student so far. There are no right or wrong answers.

Please use the following scale:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Unsure or neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I can't seem to focus when I am studying.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I work very hard in my studies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Studying my subject matter is satisfying to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I don't feel that I am making progress at university.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I want to learn as much as possible at university.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel happy at university.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am keen to acquire a lot of knowledge about my subject area.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am satisfied with my chosen course.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am striving to reach my full potential at university.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am determined to do well in my studies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I don't feel happy on my course.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I try to be the best I can be at my studies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I don't enjoy my course.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am confident in my studies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Studying at university makes me feel happy.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel as though I have no motivation to study.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I read a large amount of material on my subject matter.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
At university, I am trying to reach my full potential.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
While I am at university, I aim to reach my full potential.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Learning about my subject matter makes me feel happy.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I don't put much effort into exams.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am committed to learning.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I frequently lack enthusiasm to learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I enjoy the courses I am taking.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I revise my subject matter extensively before exams.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do additional reading on my subject matter.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I approach my academic work with a lot of motivation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am not very optimistic about my studies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I don't read much about my subject matter.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have a great deal of determination towards my studies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I often feel that my studies are going downhill.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7