

ENHANCING STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH WELL-BEING: IMPACT OF THE GROW A GRITTY HERO'S MINDSET COURSE

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course, which develops psychological capital (Hope, self-Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism), on engineering students in Stellenbosch University's Extended Curriculum Program (ECP). The intervention was evaluated through three complementary frameworks, including the EPOCH (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness) Measure of Adolescent Well-Being, the Harvard Flourishing Index, and assessment of psychological resources. Using a mixed-methods approach across three cohorts from 2021 to 2024, the study reveals significant improvements across multiple dimensions of well-being and psychological resources. Growth mindset showed the most consistent improvements across all cohorts, with the 2024 cohort demonstrating the most comprehensive positive changes across all measures. The study contributes to understanding how well-being interventions can support student success by demonstrating the value of integrated psychological resource development in extended curriculum programs.

Keywords: Psychological capital, student well-being, flourishing, academic success, EPOCH framework, extended curriculum program, engineering, intervention.

1 INTRODUCTION

The transition to university represents a critical developmental period for students, particularly those in extended curriculum programs who may face additional academic and psychological challenges [1] [2] [3]. Beyond academic preparation, psychological resources such as mindset, resilience, and well-being have emerged as crucial contributors to student success [4], [5], [6]. Research has demonstrated that students' perceptions of their abilities, their approaches to challenges, and their psychological well-being can profoundly influence their academic engagement, persistence, and achievement.

This study presents a comprehensive evaluation of the Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course, an intervention designed to enhance psychological resources and well-being among engineering students in Stellenbosch University's Extended Curriculum Program. We integrate three complementary evaluation approaches: (1) pre-post quantitative assessment of well-being and psychological resources, (2) structured benefit analysis of perceived impacts, and (3) thematic analysis of student testimonials. By analysing data across three cohorts (2021, 2023, and 2024), we explore both consistent impacts and potential evolutionary changes in the intervention's effectiveness over time.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course integrates several theoretical frameworks from positive psychology and educational psychology. The name references its focus on developing psychological capital elements - Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism (the HERO components) - alongside grit and growth mindset.

The intervention draws on psychological capital theory [7], which proposes that these four psychological resources can be developed and have a measurable impact on performance and well-being. It incorporates growth mindset theory [5], which distinguishes between fixed mindsets (believing abilities are static) and growth mindsets (believing abilities can be developed through effort and learning). The course also builds on grit research [4], which highlights the importance of passion and persistence for long-term goals.

Additionally, the intervention integrates well-being frameworks, including the PERMA framework (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) developed by Seligman [8], and VanderWeele's flourishing conceptualizations [9], which broadens well-being to include character, virtue, and financial stability alongside more traditional dimensions.

Keyes' conceptualization of mental health as a complete state - encompassing both the absence of mental illness and the presence of flourishing - provides a further crucial theoretical foundation for our intervention [10]. His research demonstrates that students with higher levels of positive mental health show greater academic engagement and achievement, even when controlling for psychological distress [11].

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 The Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset Course Structure

The course is delivered over one academic semester through six modules addressing eight action themes, as outlined in Table 1. Each module includes a variety of activities designed to develop specific psychological resources while also fostering connections between different components of the intervention. The course is delivered through a blended approach combining online activities with in-person components. Online activities are completed on the i-FlourishWell4Life platform, a dedicated online learning environment designed specifically for this course that provides interactive exercises, self-assessments, reflective journaling prompts, and progress tracking tools. This platform allows for independent reflection and self-paced learning, while in-person sessions facilitate collaborative learning and group discussions.

Table 1. Course Structure and Key Activities.

#	Module	Action Themes	Key Activities
1	Be Well & Feeling at Home	Feeling You Belong Enhance Wellness & Well-being	"Feeling You Belong" writing exercises Six dimensions of wellness reflection PERMA-V assessment
2	Grow Your Grit	Grow Your Grit	Grit Self-assessment "Meet Me in Ten Years" future visioning "Wheel of Life Reflection"
3	Cultivate a Growth Mindset	Cultivate a Growth Mindset	Mindset assessment "Name that Mindset" identification "Growth Mindset Continuum" reflection 20 Guidelines to Developing a Growth Mindset Reflection
4	Believe in Yourself in the Big Moments	Believe in Yourself	Self-efficacy Scale "Keep a Victory Log" Confidence-building exercises
5	Bounce Back Better	Increase Your Resilience	"Finding Silver Linings" reframing "The Resilience Plan (4 S's)" Resilience assessment
6	Have High Hope & Be Optimistic	Hope Be Optimistic	"Nurture Your Hope" worksheet Optimism exercises Hope assessment

2.2 Participants

Participants were engineering students enrolled in Stellenbosch University's Extended Curriculum Program (ECP) who completed the Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course as part of a compulsory first-year module called "University Practice 176." Data were collected from three cohorts as shown in Table 2.

The 2022 cohort was excluded from the analysis due to insufficient sample size resulting from administrative challenges that affected data collection that year.

Table 2. Study Participants by Cohort.

Cohort	# Completing Pretest AND Post-test	# Completing Testimonials and Benefit Analysis
2021	N = 40	N = 33
2023	N = 41	N = 34
2024	N = 35	N = 27

2.3 Evaluation Approaches

Three complementary evaluation approaches were employed to provide a multi-faceted understanding of the intervention's impact.

2.3.1 Pre-Post Quantitative Assessment

A pretest-posttest design measured changes across multiple dimensions of well-being and psychological resources. Pre-intervention measures were collected through the SUBSIFY questionnaire (Stellenbosch University Baseline Survey for Incoming First-Years) during the February welcoming period. Post-intervention assessments were conducted via a Check-In Survey during May/June exams after course completion. Statistical analysis was performed using paired t-tests (two-tailed) to compare pre- and post-intervention scores for each outcome measure. The measurement frameworks included:

- 1 **EPOCH Wellbeing [12]:** This measure assesses five dimensions of adolescent well-being - Engagement (absorption in activities), Perseverance (persistence toward goals), Optimism (confidence about the future), Connectedness (satisfying relationships), and Happiness (positive emotional states) - each measured on a 1-5 scale.
- 2 **Harvard Flourishing Index [9]:** This framework measures six dimensions of flourishing - Happiness & Life Satisfaction, Physical & Mental Health, Meaning & Purpose, Character & Virtue, Relationships, and Financial Stability - on a 0-10 scale. Two composite indices are calculated: the Flourishing Index (average of the first five dimensions) and the Secure Flourishing Index (average of all six dimensions).
- 3 **Psychological Resources:** Several established measures assessed specific psychological resources, including Growth Mindset [5], Grit [4], Hope [13], Self-Efficacy [14], and Stress Mindset [15].
- 4 **Individual Wellness Habits:** Thirteen habits across six wellness dimensions [16] were assessed, capturing specific behaviors and practices related to physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual, and occupational wellness.

2.3.2 Structured Benefit Analysis

After completing the course and final assessment, students voluntarily indicated which benefits they personally experienced from a predetermined list of 14 potential outcomes. This approach provided a standardized way to assess perceived impacts across cohorts, complementing the pre-post measures with student-identified benefits.

2.3.3 Thematic Analysis of Testimonials

Students provided written testimonials describing how they benefited personally from the course. These narratives were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach [17]: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analysis.

2.3.4 Integrated Analysis

Following the separate analyses, an integration process was conducted to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence across the three evaluation approaches. This integration followed mixed-methods integration principles described by Fetters, Curry and Creswell, [18], focusing particularly on triangulation patterns and meta-themes that emerged across evaluation methodologies.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Pre-Post Quantitative Assessment

3.1.1 EPOCH Wellbeing

The EPOCH assessment revealed varying patterns of improvement across cohorts, with the 2024 cohort showing the most comprehensive positive changes. Table 3 summarizes the significant changes in EPOCH dimensions across the three cohorts.

Table 3. Significant Changes in EPOCH Dimensions by Cohort.

EPOCH Dimension	2021 Cohort	2023 Cohort	2024 Cohort	Cross-Cohort Pattern
Engagement	√ (3.24→3.49, p=0.016)	-	-	Stronger impact in earlier cohort
Perseverance	-	-	√ (3.85→4.14, p=0.045)	Only significant in 2024
Optimism	√ (3.93→4.12, p=0.013)	-	√ (4.10→4.43, p=0.019)	Consistent impact in 2021 & 2024
Connectedness	-	√ (3.80→4.14, p=0.031)	√ (3.74→4.26, p=0.006)	Increasing impact in later cohorts
Happiness	√ (3.48→3.76, p=0.008)	-	√ (3.33→3.79, p=0.043)	Consistent impact in 2021 & 2024
Overall EPOCH	√ (3.78→3.94, p=0.003)	-	√ (3.65→3.98, p=0.032)	Consistent impact in 2021 & 2024

Note: "√" in Table 3 indicates statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$); "-" indicates non-significant change.

The 2021 cohort showed significant improvements in Engagement, Optimism, and Happiness, along with overall EPOCH score. The 2023 cohort demonstrated significant improvement only in Connectedness. The 2024 cohort exhibited the most comprehensive improvements, with significant positive changes in four dimensions (Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness) and overall EPOCH score.

3.1.2 Harvard Flourishing Index

The flourishing assessment revealed an expanding pattern of positive impacts across cohorts, with the 2024 cohort showing the most comprehensive improvements. Table 4 summarizes the significant changes in flourishing dimensions across the three cohorts.

The 2021 cohort showed significant improvement only in the Relationships dimension. The 2023 cohort demonstrated significant improvements in the Character & Virtue dimension and the Secure Flourishing Index. The 2024 cohort exhibited the most comprehensive flourishing improvements, with significant positive changes in the Happiness & Life Satisfaction dimension, Physical & Mental Health dimension, and Relationships dimension. Both the Flourishing Index and Secure Flourishing Index showed significant improvements for this cohort.

Table 4. Significant Improvements in Flourishing Dimensions by Cohort.

Flourishing Dimension	2021 Cohort	2023 Cohort	2024 Cohort	Cross-Cohort Pattern
Happiness & Life Satisfaction	-	-	√ (6.06→7.53, p=0.005)	Impact only in 2024 cohort
Physical & Mental Health	-	-	√ (6.06→7.16, p=0.042)	Impact only in 2024 cohort
Meaning & Purpose	-	-	-	No significant impact across cohorts
Character & Virtue	-	√ (7.49→8.16, p=0.015)	-	Impact only in 2023 cohort
Relationships	√ (6.99→7.60, p=0.048)	-	√ (6.66→8.13, p=0.005)	Consistent impact in 2021 & 2024
Financial Stability	-	-	-	No significant impact across cohorts

Flourishing Index	-	-	√ (6.83→7.94, p=0.012)	Impact only in 2024 cohort
Secure Flourishing Index	-	√ (6.60→7.08, p=0.034)	√ (6.65→7.59, p=0.032)	Consistent impact in 2023 & 2024

Note: "√" in Table 4 indicates statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$); "-" indicates non-significant change.

3.1.3 Psychological Resources and Wellness

The assessment of specific psychological resources revealed both consistent patterns and variable impacts across cohorts. Table 5 summarizes the significant changes in psychological resources across the three cohorts.

Growth mindset showed the most consistent and substantial improvements across all three cohorts, with highly significant positive changes in each year. This finding suggests the intervention is particularly effective at developing students' beliefs about the malleability of abilities through effort and learning, a psychological resource that has been linked to academic resilience and achievement in prior research [19].

Overall wellness habits also showed significant improvements across all three cohorts, indicating the intervention's consistent positive impact on wellness behaviours and practices. Other psychological resources showed more variable patterns, with stress mindset improvement unique to the 2021 cohort and grit-related measures showing the most improvement in the 2023 cohort.

Table 5. Significant Changes in Psychological Resources and Wellness by Cohort.

<i>Flourishing Dimension</i>	<i>2021 Cohort</i>	<i>2023 Cohort</i>	<i>2024 Cohort</i>	<i>Cross-Cohort Pattern</i>
Growth Mindset	√ (4.07→4.63, p<0.0001)	√ (4.04→4.55, p=0.005)	√ (3.91→4.51, p<0.001)	Consistent strong impact across all cohorts
Overall Grit	-	~ (3.55→3.77, p=0.057)	-	Limited impact; approaching significance only in 2023
Grit: Consistency of Interest	-	√ (3.21→3.54, p=0.029)	-	Impact only in 2023 cohort
Grit: Perseverance of Effort	-	-	-	No significant impact across cohorts
Stress Mindset	√ (1.73→2.19, p=0.0003)	-	-	Impact only in 2021 cohort
Overall Hope	-	-	-	No significant impact across cohorts
Hope: Waypower	-	-	-	No significant impact across cohorts
Hope: Willpower	-	-	√* (6.63→6.05, p=0.035)	Significant decrease in 2024 cohort
Self-Efficacy	-	-	-	No significant impact across cohorts
Overall Wellness Habits	√ (47.12→50.10, p=0.001)	√ (47.17→50.56, p=0.019)	√ (46.46→51.14, p=0.024)	Consistent impact across all cohorts

Note: "√" in Table 5 indicates statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$); "~" indicates change approaching significance ($p < 0.1$); "-" indicates non-significant change; "√*" indicates statistically significant decrease.

3.2 Structured Benefit Analysis

The structured benefit analysis revealed both consistently high-impact benefits and evolving patterns of perceived benefits across cohorts. Three benefits maintained consistently high reporting rates (>70% in most cohorts) across all three years: personal growth, increased self-awareness, and an attitude of gratitude.

Several benefits showed a clear positive trend across cohorts, with the 2024 cohort reporting substantially higher rates than earlier cohorts. Most notably, "an improved mindset" increased dramatically from 36.4% in 2021 to 70.4% in 2024, and "learning new coping skills" rose from 48.5% in 2021 to 77.8% in 2024.

The average percentage of students reporting benefits across all categories showed a positive trend, rising from 54.0% in 2021 and 50.2% in 2023 to 65.9% in 2024, suggesting the intervention's perceived effectiveness has strengthened over time.

3.3 Thematic Analysis of Testimonials

The thematic analysis of student testimonials revealed four themes that remained consistently prominent across all three cohorts, though with distinctive evolutionary patterns in how these themes manifested:

- 1 **Mindset Transformation:** Evolution from a basic understanding of growth vs. fixed mindset to sophisticated integration with other psychological resources.
- 2 **Enhanced Self-Awareness:** Progression from general recognition of personal characteristics to nuanced self-understanding and its connections to other domains.
- 3 **Transition Support and Belonging:** Evolution from primarily individual experiences toward greater emphasis on social connection.
- 4 **Resilience Development:** Increasing sophistication in understanding and application, from basic concepts of bouncing back to nuanced perspectives on "falling forward."

Beyond these core themes, several notable evolutions were observed in how students engaged with and articulated the impact of the course over the three cohorts:

- From Individual Focus to Social Integration
- From Theoretical Appreciation to Practical Application
- From Separate Skills to Integrated Capabilities
- From Present-Focused to Future-Oriented
- From Receptive Learning to Transformative Journey

3.4 Integrated Analysis: Triangulation Across Evaluation Approaches

The integration of findings from pre-post assessment, benefit analysis, and thematic analysis revealed areas of strong convergence across evaluation approaches, providing more robust evidence for certain impacts while also highlighting complementary insights from different methodologies.

3.4.1 *Mindset Transformation*

Mindset Transformation emerged as an area of particularly strong convergence across all three evaluation approaches. The pre-post assessment demonstrated significant improvements in growth mindset across all three cohorts. The benefit analysis showed dramatic increases in reporting of "an improved mindset," especially in the 2024 cohort. The thematic analysis identified mindset transformation as a persistent core theme, with increasingly sophisticated articulation over time.

3.4.2 *Enhanced Self-Awareness and Personal Growth*

Enhanced Self-Awareness and Personal Growth also showed strong convergence across evaluation approaches. The pre-post assessment revealed improvements in various measures related to self-understanding. The benefit analysis consistently showed high rates of reporting for "personal growth" and "an increase in self-awareness" across all cohorts. The thematic analysis identified enhanced self-awareness as a persistent theme with progressive deepening over time.

3.4.3 *Development of Positive Psychological Resources*

Development of Positive Psychological Resources demonstrated strong convergence as well. The pre-post assessment showed significant improvements in EPOCH optimism, happiness, and flourishing dimensions related to happiness and life satisfaction. The benefit analysis revealed consistently high reporting of "attitude of gratitude" and "positive outlook." The thematic analysis identified the development of optimism and positive outlook as important themes.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Evolution Across Cohorts

A notable pattern across all evaluation approaches was the evidence for enhanced impact in the 2024 cohort compared to earlier cohorts:

- 1 In the pre-post assessment, the 2024 cohort showed the most comprehensive improvements across measurement frameworks.
- 2 In the benefit analysis, the 2024 cohort reported higher rates of benefits across nearly all categories.
- 3 In the thematic analysis, the 2024 cohort demonstrated more sophisticated integration of concepts, more transformative narratives, and greater application to future contexts.

This convergent evidence strengthens the case for genuine enhancement of the intervention's impact over time, potentially reflecting refinement of program content, improved delivery methods, or increased institutional knowledge about effective implementation strategies.

4.2 Theoretical Implications

The convergent evidence for mindset transformation leading to broader improvements supports theories positioning psychological resources as developmental catalysts [6], [19]. Growth mindset, in particular, emerged as a consistently strong impact across all cohorts and evaluation methodologies. This aligns with Dweck's theory that mindset serves as a foundational belief system that influences how individuals approach challenges, respond to setbacks, and engage with learning opportunities [5].

The evolution from separate skills to integrated capabilities observed in the thematic analysis, alongside improvements across multiple domains in the pre-post assessment, suggests that effective interventions should aim beyond discrete skill development toward integrated psychological resources [20].

The improvements across diverse well-being dimensions support theories emphasizing the interconnectedness of psychological, social, and emotional well-being [12], [9]. The finding that improvements often spanned multiple dimensions of EPOCH well-being and flourishing suggests these constructs may function as an interconnected system rather than independent domains.

4.3 Practical Implications

The integrated findings suggest several practical implications for designing and implementing psychological resource interventions in higher education contexts, particularly for extended curriculum programs:

- 1 The broad pattern of improvements across dimensions supports the value of comprehensive interventions that address multiple psychological resources rather than narrowly focused programs.
- 2 The evolution observed in student experiences suggests interventions should anticipate and support developmental progression from basic understanding to sophisticated integration of concepts.
- 3 The strongest impacts appear to emerge from balancing personal psychological development with social connection, theoretical understanding with practical application, and present coping with future orientation.
- 4 The persistent emphasis on transition support and belonging suggests that establishing these foundations early may create conditions for other psychological developments.
- 5 The finding that effects appeared to strengthen over time highlights the value of ongoing program refinement based on evaluation and experience.

The findings have particular relevance for engineering education, where technical competence has traditionally overshadowed psychological development. Engineering students in extended curriculum programs may face unique pressures related to perceived academic inadequacy and concerns about prolonged time to graduation. The consistent improvements in growth mindset observed across all cohorts suggest that interventions like the Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course can help engineering students develop adaptive beliefs about their abilities, particularly important in a field where complex problem-solving and continuous learning are essential. The strengthening of connectedness in later

cohorts also addresses the social isolation often reported in engineering programs, potentially contributing to better retention and academic success.

4.4 Limitations and Future Directions

While this multi-method evaluation provides robust evidence for the impact of the Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course, several limitations should be considered:

- 1 The absence of control groups across all three cohorts represents a significant limitation.
- 2 The relatively small samples in each cohort (n=35-41) limit statistical power and generalizability.
- 3 The reliance on self-selection and self-report represents another limitation.
- 4 The absence of 2022 data creates a gap in understanding year-to-year progression.
- 5 The study does not directly examine relationships between psychological improvements and academic outcomes.

Future research should incorporate control or comparison groups, examine relationships between psychological improvements and academic outcomes, conduct longer-term follow-up assessments, investigate which specific program components contribute most significantly to which outcomes, and explore potential adaptations for different student populations and delivery contexts.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This comprehensive evaluation of the Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course demonstrates its effectiveness in enhancing multiple dimensions of student well-being and psychological resources across three cohorts of engineering students in an Extended Curriculum Program. By integrating pre-post assessment, benefit analysis, and thematic analysis of testimonials, we have developed a nuanced understanding of both the consistent core impacts of the intervention and its evolution over time.

The triangulation of findings across evaluation approaches provides robust evidence for several key impacts, with particularly strong convergence on mindset transformation, enhanced self-awareness and personal growth, improved resilience and coping, and development of positive psychological resources. The intervention appears to effectively promote psychological development across multiple domains simultaneously, with growth mindset emerging as a consistently strong effect across all cohorts.

The evaluation also reveals an evolution in the intervention's impact over time, with the 2024 cohort demonstrating the most comprehensive improvements across all evaluation methodologies. This pattern suggests potential maturation and refinement of the program, highlighting the value of iterative improvement in educational interventions.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how structured psychological resource interventions can support student development during critical educational transitions, particularly for students in extended curriculum programs. The multi-faceted nature of the improvements suggests that such interventions may support not only academic resilience but also broader personal development and well-being.

As higher education institutions globally grapple with supporting increasingly diverse student populations and addressing mental health challenges, this study offers an evidence-based model for holistic student development. The Grow a Gritty HERO's Mindset course demonstrates that well-designed psychological interventions can achieve measurable improvements in multiple well-being dimensions simultaneously. The evolutionary improvement observed across cohorts particularly highlights the value of institutional commitment to refining and adapting such programs based on ongoing evaluation - a practice that could benefit similar initiatives across different disciplines and contexts.

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