

An Olympic Model for Holistic Student Health and Well-being

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ABSTRACT:

This presentation sets out a concept of holistic student health care based on the ancient Olympic ideal of "a healthy mind in a healthy body" and uses the symbol of the five Olympic rings within the Olympic flag to emphasise the five areas encompassing holistic student health care, namely: Academic Achievement; Physical Fitness; Psychological well-being; Social Engagement and Meaning and Purpose

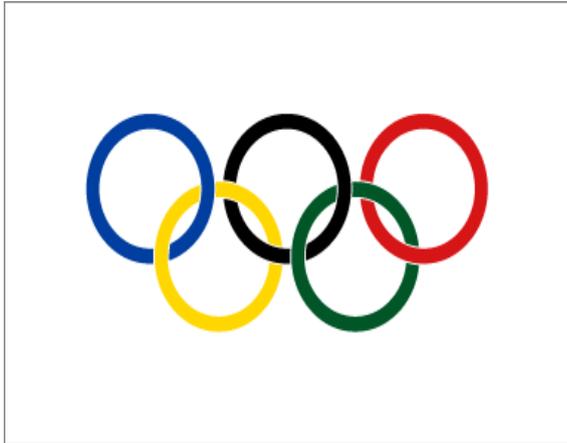
The first four areas are self-evident however all five need expanded upon. The fifth area "Meaning & Purpose" encompasses such issues as a meaningful life and spiritual satisfaction. It must also be considered in the secular setting of modern day universities.

The student healthcare setting provides an ideal opportunity to tailor a health promotion programme and encourage lifestyle choices that will endure beyond their primary degree. The Higher Education Institution should embed the holistic approach into its operational plan. Third Level education, in addition to securing a good degree or diploma should also empower the student to adopt the holistic principles of the five identified areas and appreciate that enhancing each of the individual areas has a cumulative effect on all areas to provide the optimal student experience. Student Support Services should provide a lead in this area but the holistic approach will require a "buy-in" from the academic departments, the University Health and/or GP services, as well as the student bodies and individual students. This paper explores the different areas and how the GP practice works with the University to further develop holistic student health & well-being.

An Olympic Concept: Introduction

The word holistic comes from the Greek word *holos* meaning all, whole, entire or total. It is the idea that all the properties from a given system cannot be determined or explained by its component parts alone. Rather, the system as a whole determines in an important way how the parts behave, or to put it another way, the whole of the system is greater than the sum of its parts. Holistic student health care entails looking after all the components that make up student health. This paper presents a concept for provision of holistic health care to students in Third Level Education based on this holistic approach.

The holistic idea is the basis of the ancient Greeks' belief that the development of the mind, spirit, and body were linked. The ancient Olympic ideal was "a healthy mind in a healthy



body." But what exactly do we mean by a "healthy mind" and would we know if we had one?

The Olympic flag was created by the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin making its official debut at the 1920 games in Antwerp, Belgium². Pierre chose a five-ring symbol to represent the five continents and selected six colours (white, red, yellow, green, blue and black) because

each flag of the countries that were part of the Olympic movement contain at least one of those colours. Furthermore, it represents the union of the five continents and the meeting of athletes from throughout the world at the Olympic Games. This article presents a concept based on the Olympic rings when discussing student health and well-being. Instead of five rings representing five continents, the paper presents the five areas which might be considered in a holistic approach to student health and well-being.

Namely:

Academic Achievement;

Physical Fitness;

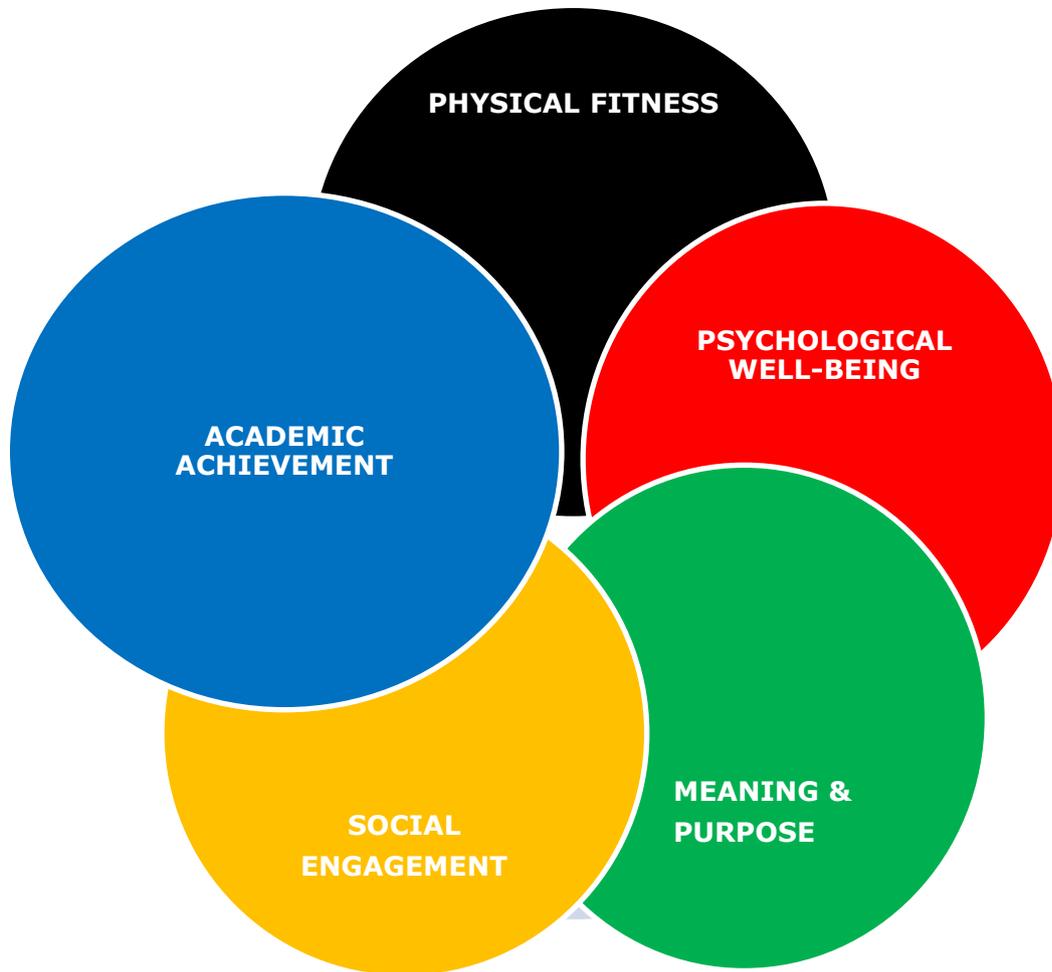
Psychological Well-being;

Social Engagement;

Meaning & Purpose.

Additionally, the concept of interlocking rings as they appear on the Olympic flag is appropriate as these areas overlap and strengths in one area enhance strengths in the others (and, similarly, weakness in an area will have a detrimental effect on others). These should be areas for aspiration goals for the student rather than ideals for excellence, bearing in mind that no one can be perfect in every area and striving to be so could be counter-productive! On the other hand, the Higher Education Institutions including their student support and affiliated healthcare services should strive to ensure every aspect of their work allows the students to meet their aspirations in these areas.

'The Five Rings of Holistic Student Health & Well-Being'



Physical Fitness

As is the case within the general population, there is significant variation in the level of physical fitness in students, from elite athlete (such as the Oxford and Cambridge Blues taking part in the annual Boat Race) to the physically inactive. There are many opportunities to improve fitness on this whilst in university, however, the opposite also applies and university life can be one of relative inactivity if the student is not suitably encouraged and guided! (See excerpt from Sunday Times, August 20, 2006 next page)

Sunday Times: August 20, 2006 Marc Horne

University students get obesity health warning.

UNIVERSITY students are being issued with obesity warnings in the wake of research showing the average fresher puts on a stone in their first year. A leaflet produced by the student association at the University of Dundee advises undergraduates to steer clear of junk food and to drink sensibly. It says undergraduates who gorge on fatty food and alcohol are far less likely to get good grades.

"First-year students can gain as much as 15lbs in their first year at university because of the changes in food and diet patterns," the health warning states. "Student intake of fat, sugar and carbohydrates often exceeds the daily recommended levels.

"Students with a well-balanced, healthy diet will find their academic performance is consistent with the state of their physical health. Eating habits during the university years create eating habits that impact on future health."

The move follows an American study showing that the average student puts on 15lbs — dubbed the Fresher's 15 — within 12 months. Professor Annie Anderson, a nutritionist from the university's centre for public health and nutritional research, said there was mounting concern over the number of overweight and obese students in Scotland. She said a combination of factors including stress, being away from home for the first time, peer pressure and an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, was causing a growing number of students to balloon.

"The main issue here is booze," she said. "Not all students drink to excess but when young people leave home there is a lot more freedom and a couple of pints every night really does add up as alcohol is quite high in calories."

Anderson said that the rapid increase in car ownership among students had also taken its toll. "People assume being at university involves a lot of physical activity because there are so many sports associations but many students have cars, which was pretty much unheard of in the past," she said.

However, Anderson added that the stereotype of the hard-drinking student who spends more time in the pub than at lectures was far from the truth. "A lot of students have part-time jobs so they are working hard and studying hard. Thinking about nutrition and health is way down their list of priorities. The pressures on students nowadays are enormous." She said youngsters who are used to having their meals cooked for them at home often struggle to cater for themselves. "There is a tendency to eat lots more junk food as it is convenient and inexpensive," she said.

The Dundee Students' Association is urging freshers to buy vouchers that can be exchanged for fresh healthy food, but not alcohol or sweets.

Physical Fitness as a generic area might be divided into two separate areas, namely Physical Health and Disease Management (see table 1)

<u>PHYSICAL HEALTH</u>	<u>DISEASE MANAGEMENT</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diet & Weight management • Cardiovascular & Strengthening Exercise • Alcohol Consumption Control • Smoking Cessation • Screening & Immunisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-management of minor ailments • Treatment of acute illness • Optimal management of chronic conditions • Sexually Transmitted infections • Musculoskeletal injury & rehabilitation

As a student it can be hard to ensure a healthy diet. There are the financial costs and the time costs. Furthermore, convenience foods can be so – well convenient! But this option is not usually the healthy option. Frequently, therefore, students will find they put on weight at university. Conversely, the reverse is also more prevalent than in the general population and anorexia nervosa is also frequently seen!

Students should be encouraged to either start or, indeed, maintain high levels of cardiovascular fitness. In fact it may benefit the student to be offered fitness profile assessments and discuss fitness goals, both short-term, for the period of their time a university and indeed as a graduate. If physical activity is not factored into the student's schedule from the start it becomes increasingly difficult to slot it in at a later date.

Awareness of behavioural change models in the area of physical activity is required when planning and offering physical activity facilities to the students. According to the transtheoretical model, behavioural change is seen as a process over time with six stages (Henriksson and Sundberg, 2010).

1. Pre-Contemplation Stage;
2. Contemplation Stage;
3. Preparation;
4. Action Stage;
5. Maintenance Stage;
6. Termination Stage.

Depending on which stage in behavioural change in which the student is, the approach to promoting physical activity will differ (Spencer, Admans , Malone, Roy & Yost. p 428-443). The Termination Stage is defined as "Participants have full faith in their behaviour and will not return to their previous behaviour, regardless of the situation". This should be a physical fitness goal for university students.

Alcohol consumption is an important factor to consider in respect of academic achievement, physical fitness, psychological well-being and spiritual satisfaction. Even in respect of social engagement were it can initially have a potentially enhancing effect, excess alcohol consumption will sooner or later be detrimental. Studies by Berwick, Mulhern, Barkham , Trusler, Hill & Stiles (2008) have shown that students often drink too heavily when they start university but most settle down as they progress through university and in their post-graduate years. Unfortunately, some will suffer as a result of excessive alcohol use (and this can happen early on in a student's undergraduate life). It is beholding on the university and its support services to endeavour to curb excesses and take remedial action when a student should present with alcohol-related problems. This, of course, reflects the issues relating to alcohol use within the community in general but students have so much to lose if they fall into the alcohol trap at this stage in their lives.

The transition to university can be a time of general turmoil so it is important that the student has good control over their condition and seek professional help and advice if the management is not satisfactory.

Sexual health is another area to consider. Again, this can be addressed in a holistic manner in terms of appropriate sex education and advice on safe sex practices, as well as screening for asymptomatic disease and the management of sexually transmitted infections. The level of knowledge students have in respect of sexual health can vary from complete ignorance to wide ranging experience in sexual practices. The associated problems that may occur will be affected by this spectrum of knowledge or ignorance and will, of course, also affect psychological well-being. Any difficulties a student may be having regarding sexual issues including sexual orientation, worries about sexually transmitted disease or even simply relationship issues may be of great distress to that student and they will need sympathetic, well-informed and non-judgemental handling by the student support services.

Psychological Well-being

As stated by the ancient Greeks "a healthy mind in a healthy body". That is the desired ideal but what is a healthy mind and how to you get and keep one? Well! Being well educated helps (Academic Achievement); being physically active definitely helps (Physical Fitness); having a good social network is very beneficial (Social Engagement) and having a strong sense of self-worth, positive values and resilience is protective (Meaning & Purpose). Important protective elements include enjoyment of your academic or vocational work, good time-management, physical fitness, support from family and friends and the professional help of the university academic and support staff. Having a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem is very protective. But like physical fitness self-confidence and self-esteem must be built up and maintained.

Third level education has a significant positive effect on psychological well-being. Those educated to degree level are not only more likely to be in full time employment than those with lower educational attainment, but also less likely to smoke and be overweight and more likely to exercise regularly and eat healthily (DHSSPSNI). From a health promotion perspective students at university are generally well-motivated and this is an ideal opportunity, as stated by Kracen (2003): 'to strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention'. Students tend to be goal-driven and are well motivated and are able to use the newly found skills of independent learning and problem resolution.

There are, however, issues around third level education that can challenge the new student's psychological well-being (Royal College of Psychiatrists). Factors that can be challenging include:

- moving away from home, family and childhood friends.
- Cultural and language difficulties for international students.
- Stresses of university life including financial worries, difficulties with transition to independent living and study, relationship issues and heightened aspirations for achievement (and employment!).
- Pre-existing psychiatric disorders and problems such as eating disorders
- Significant "life events" such a bereavement or divorce of parents and issues such as previous psychological trauma in childhood or as a teenager.
- University life is relatively structured around the academic calendar with deadlines for assignments, modules and examinations whereas the actual study itself is relatively unstructured.

One other area that can have a negative effect on psychological well-being is alcohol and/or substance abuse. Students, like their non-student peers have frequent exposure

to alcohol and drugs. University health services across the United Kingdom and Ireland have had to deal with an increase in students experiencing problems with excessive alcohol use and from using other "mind-altering" substances (Cahill & Byrne 2009). These are issues which the University, its Student Support Service and Health care services need policies to reduce the potential damage that can occur. As stated by Coghill, Orme & Swindells (2009):

"Every HEI should have a comprehensive alcohol policy which is accessible and visible to all students and staff..... . Additionally, involving students [as volunteers to facilitate work related to sensible drinking] provides a means by which the message of responsible drinking can be administered throughout a diverse student population group" .

Measures to protect and enhance psychological well-being need to be embedded in the operation of the Higher Education Institutions, and, when students do experience difficulties with their psychological health they need access to rapidly responding services when they are experiencing these mental stresses and/or illness. Often these services do not need to be very sophisticated provided they are timely. There will, however, be occasions when a student needs a higher level of support which is tailored to their needs and understands the issues as they affect student. The service needs to be aware of the effects academic study may have on psychological health and vice versa how psychological well-being will affect academic performance.

Social Engagement

Key elements:

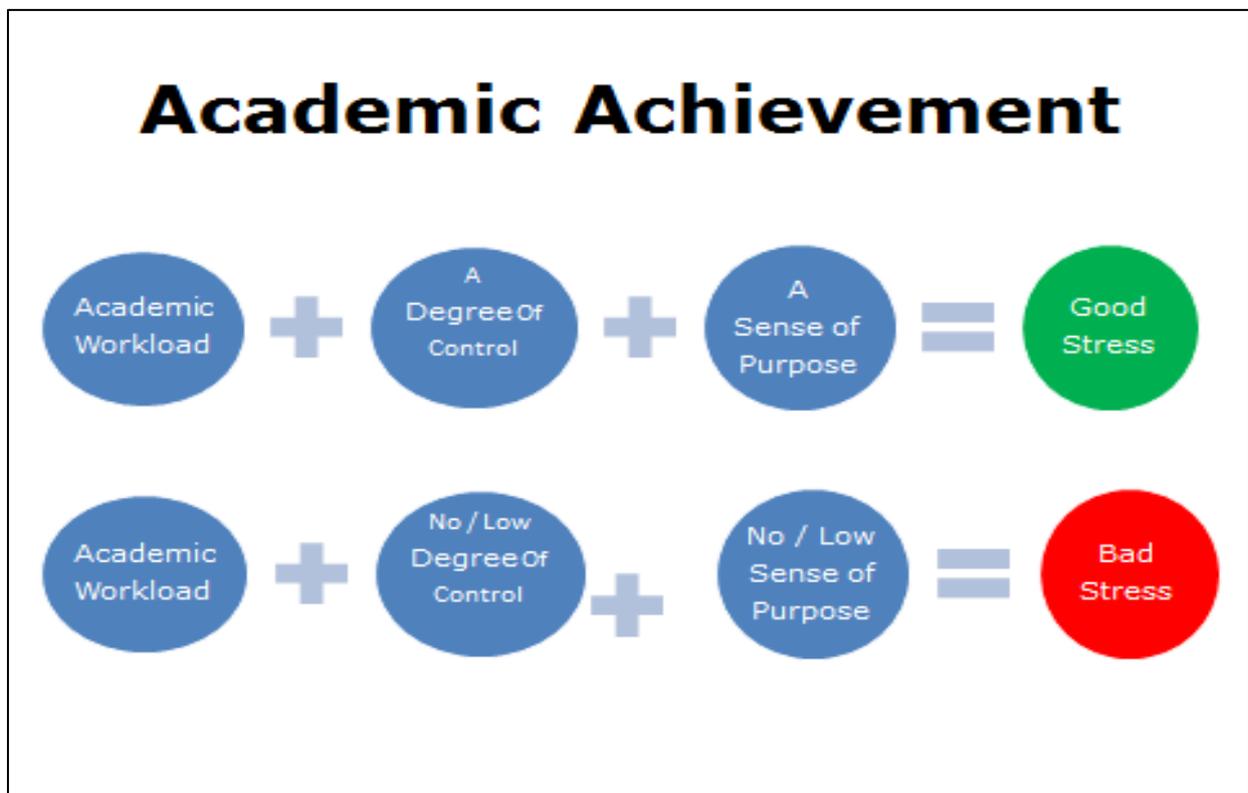
- Activity (doing something)
- Interaction (two or more people involved in the activity)
- Social exchange (the activity involves giving or receiving something from others)
- Lack of compulsion (there is no outside force forcing and individual to engage in the activity)
- Generally excludes activities for which person is getting paid, or family obligations.

Going to university is a great excuse to enhance social contacts. In the new circumstances students will find that others are keen to make new friends. Furthermore, if they are moving to rented accommodation on campus or off campus they will have new flatmates to get to know. In addition the university will have a whole host of clubs and societies. Social engagement is an aspect of university life that can be challenging for some students. Furthermore, those who remain in the parental home whilst studying

may miss out in some of the social aspects of university life. Whilst it is still a question of balance between appropriate study time and social engagement the importance latter must not be overlooked!

Academic Achievement

This is an obvious goal for the student and university but is perhaps not a direct consideration for the health care providers. (A detailed discussion on the aspects of academic performance is beyond the scope of the article and this author!) But a student's health will influence their academic performance and, conversely, academic demands may affect the student's health. Circumstances are not helped if the student falls into the "earn to learn" category and have to get paid work part-time in order to keep a student loan under control! This can result in unintended neglect of academic work if the pressures of paid work conflict with their study priorities. Again the situation may be exacerbated by the fact that in a lot of cases the part-time job will involve such activities as waitressing or bar work which often involve late night working hours. For many the problem relates to the sheer workload demands from academic and other work with a feeling of loss of control. (Fears about prospects after graduation may also add to the student's stress by affecting their sense of purpose!)



As stated by Grant & Potenza (2010) time-management is important. This includes monitoring of time, goal setting/prioritizing and planning. Self-monitoring is a useful

exercise as it can be surprising how quickly time can be flittered away. Keeping a diary over a number of days it might surprise the student how much time they might spend preparing to study rather than actual study or how much time is spent on social internet networks rather than online research. Using this information may enable the student to reallocate more dedicated time to their studies whilst allowing themselves appropriate breaks. Goal setting/prioritizing and planning can give the student more control over the time pressures which are inevitable in university life. Students will feel a sensation of information overload and setting study goals and prioritizing the topics for their study will be vital. They need to learn how to separate the wood from the trees!

Meaning & Purpose

Theologians and philosophers may spend a great deal of their time considering the meaning of life. For most of us it is not an everyday consideration – possibly only considered at certain particular times. These may be times of change which might include the changes involved in moving to Third Level Education. Other times may include those times of change relating to family circumstances and to personal health and circumstances (e.g. financial, relationship or health related which might include depression, eating-disorders and issues around gender orientation).

Meaning & Purpose is a term used by Prof. Martin Seligman, Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Whilst it might be amalgamated into Psychological well-being, I believe it deserves a section of its own and completes one of the “rings” of the Olympic symbol. The psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1992 p. 217) states of the meaning of Life: ‘The meaning of life is meaning – whatever it is, wherever it comes from’. It is meaning with a sense of purpose that allows students to make the most of the student experience. It is both the initiator of the effort and the goal to which to strive for!

As previously stated high self-worth, positive values and self-esteem are very important in personal well-being. Meaning and Purpose can be found by some in orthodox religions of course, but is also found in other areas. Family, career and community will also provide meaning and purpose. Furthermore, a person’s sporting interest, music or involvement in campaigns the individual feels strongly about may become a focus of meaning. Generally, it is better to have meaning and purpose across a variety of avenues rather than focused on a single cause which could lead to either fanaticism or disillusionment!

The area of Meaning & Purpose (perhaps considered by some under the term spiritual growth) can be overlooked or considered too hard to approach within Higher Education Institutions. Sometimes it is left to enthusiasts who in their own enthusiasm can actually deter students from considering the subject. Alternatively it can be so neglected that the

institution can literally feel that it's got no soul. It requires a high level of institutional emotional intelligence and light touch management to get the balance right.

Putting Holistic Student Health & Well-Being into Practice.

The University Health Centre at Queen's uses the principles of holistic health care to shape its care of students registering with the practice as their GP practice. This will include large numbers of students moving into Belfast from other areas of Ireland and the United Kingdom, as well as international students. Increasingly, a sizeable minority are mature and post-graduate students. We encourage the students to consider every aspect of their health and have staff with specialist training in areas such as Sports and Exercise Medicine, Mental Health and Sexual Health. We have also developed a Facebook page for University Health Centre at Queen's through which we attempt to raise a broad range of topics covered with the five key areas.

Additionally, we liaise with the Student Services Forum within Queen's University and have contributed to their revised Student Mental Health Strategy and the newly developed Student Well-Being Strategy. The University has become increasingly engaged in the holistic approach to student health and well-being and works strenuously to continually improve the student experience. This again is work in progress.

More recently, the author of this paper has contributed to work by a (recently retired) Belfast psychiatrist who is working with the Strathmore University in Nairobi, Kenya to develop their student mental health strategy and they are interested in this 'Olympic Model' in their approach to student health and well-being

Of course, the main aim will be to get the individual student in the different institutions to think of their own well-being in a holistic fashion. If the student can appreciate the inter-connected nature of these five key areas they can use this knowledge to enhance the student experience and their success whilst at university. This same approach can then be used to enhance life as a graduate!

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