

Symposium Title: **Developing undergraduate psychology students' sense of connection to university and profession**

Chair: Dr Amanda Krause and Dr Dan Miller

Presenter Biographies

Dr Amanda Krause is a Senior Lecturer (Psychology) in the College of Healthcare Sciences at James Cook University (Queensland, Australia). She teaches research methods to undergraduates and conducts research focused on the learning and teaching of psychology at the tertiary level.

Dr Brian Law is a Senior Lecturer and Course Coordinator of the JCU Psychology Online program. He has a keen research interest in understanding online students, including factors impacting well-being (e.g., Sense of Belonging) and their use of GenAI.

Dr Dan Miller is a Lecturer (Psychology) in the College of Healthcare Sciences at James Cook University. His teaching focuses on research methods and statistics and the history of psychology. Dr. Miller actively contributes scholarship on undergraduate research education in psychology.

Dr Jonathan Connor is a Senior Lecturer (Psychology) in the College of Healthcare Sciences at James Cook University (Queensland, Australia). He has a teaching and research background in sport and exercise science and psychology, and his current teaching is in applied psychology. Dr Connor coordinates a 3rd year industry placement subject for undergraduate psychology students.

Dr. Lauren Shaw is a Senior Lecturer and the Academic Head of Psychology at James Cook University. With extensive experience in academic leadership, administration, and online learning, Dr. Shaw is passionate about delivering contemporary, high-quality, and supportive psychology education to students from all walks of life. Her research focuses on best practices in online education, with a particular interest in building a sense of community and improving communication in digital learning environments.

Symposium overview: This symposium explores a regional university's initiatives to building undergraduate psychology students' sense of connection to their university and discipline. Drawing on programs of scholarship of teaching and learning research, it will highlight how work-integrated learning and digital media (including podcasts, social media, and interactive conference platforms) are shaping the academic and professional experiences of students with a specific focus on community and belongingness. Drawing on the findings from the four studies presented, the symposium discussion will emphasise the unique challenges and opportunities that regional settings offer in terms of student engagement, professional identity development, and connection with the discipline.

Presentation 1: Exploring undergraduate psychology student experiences during a work-integrated learning (WIL) program

Presenter: Dr Jonathan Connor

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An undergraduate psychological science degree equips students with a strong foundation in scientific inquiry and human behaviour. However, unlike applied disciplines such as physiotherapy or occupational therapy, undergraduate psychology students do not have a singular, easily identifiable job role upon graduation. This necessitates an understanding of how students transition from theoretical learning to practical application in diverse professional settings. This study explored the types of activities undergraduate psychology students engage in during their 100-hour work-integrated learning (WIL) placements. Using conceptual content analysis, student placement logbooks were examined to identify the specific tasks undertaken and how psychology-related

skills were applied. Analysis revealed that students engaged in a range of activities, including conducting research, participating in collaborative case discussions, developing psychoeducational resources, engaging in professional development, observing psychological assessments and therapeutic interventions, providing social support, and performing administrative tasks relevant to psychological practice. These findings offer insight into the diverse roles psychology students occupy during placements. The presentation will go on to discuss the ways in which students integrate academic knowledge into real-world professional environments. This research contributes to the ongoing discussion of how undergraduate psychology programs can better prepare students for the workforce by bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Presentation 2: *Professionally Psyched*: Building professional identity through a student-centred podcast series

Presenter: Dr Dan Miller

Co-authors: Dr Amanda Krause, Dr Connor McShane, Ms Alison Sheaves, Dr Jonathan Connor, Ms Jessica Muller, and Dr Clint Knight

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Sense of belonging between students and their university is critical to career readiness and an important driver of retention (TESQA, 2020). However, national Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) data shows that, in general, psychology students have the lowest levels of peer engagement (44.8% positive rating) in comparison to other disciplines, which is thought to be a consequence of high levels of external study. While work-integrated learning is integral to developing student understanding of their career pathways, placement-based learning can be restrictive and inflexible for students with location barriers and time-based demands. On this basis, we piloted a podcast series in 2024 that aimed to build professional identity in our department's undergraduate cohort to enhance belongingness, career pathway clarity, and retention. The podcast series, *Professionally Psyched*, has been well received by students. To extend the series, our current project aims to incorporate two additional components to the podcast production: an interview skills training workshop for students interested in hosting a podcast episode and the establishment of the *Professionally Psyched* advisory board comprising of student representatives from each year level (1-4), HDR students, and academic staff. In this presentation, we will share findings from our research regarding these components. With data collection underway, our discussion will explore how developing student leadership through the workshop and advisory board not only shapes the podcast's direction but also cultivates a more connected, confident, and professionally engaged student community. It is anticipated that this may strengthen their professional identity, enhances retention, improves post-degree career outcomes, and fosters a more interconnected and resilient community of professionals.

Presentation 3: Came for the advice, stayed for the connection: The role of Facebook groups in fostering connection in online higher education

Presenter: Dr Lauren Shaw

Co-authors: Ms Amanda Walsh, Dr Brian Law, Dr Marc Chao

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Demand for online higher education has increased considerably as people seek to upskill and retrain while balancing work and family commitments. Online education offers benefits, including flexibility and overcoming geographical barriers that may otherwise preclude study. However, it also presents unique challenges, including increased isolation and lower sense of connection, which may be exacerbated in fast-paced accelerated online programs. Students in all study modes utilise social media, particularly Facebook, to form student-led groups. For online students, these groups are often their only avenue for informal connection with peers. Therefore, students studying online may rely more heavily on student-led social media groups.