



Exploring what makes learning meaningful for postgraduate business students in higher education

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Abstract

While research exists on what constitutes meaningful learning, our study reveals the term meaningful is an ill-defined concept that is interpreted in multiple ways, often from a teacher-centric perspective. Less is known about what constitutes meaningfulness in the context of higher education, particularly in business education. This qualitative study seeks to identify postgraduate student perspectives on what is meaningful in higher education to inform the design of authentic and transformative learning experiences. Focus groups were conducted to gain insights into students' most meaningful learning experiences across four postgraduate business subjects. We conducted a thematic analysis of the student data by inductively coding the transcripts and comments. Students derived the most value from learning experiences that incorporated real-world connections, social encounters, or productive challenges. We also found that students' discussions of meaningfulness were relatively superficial, suggesting that postgraduate students may not be primed to consider meaningfulness in relation to their learning. We thus problematise the term meaningful and conclude by proposing 'learning highs' as a new tentative conceptual frame for future research identifying learning situations in which meaningful experiences occur.

Keywords Meaningful learning · Higher education · Business · Postgraduate students · Learning highs

Introduction

In contemporary educational settings, the integration of meaningful learning experiences has gained significant attention due to its potential to enhance student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (Fletcher & Chróínín, 2022). However, the degree to which different fields of education embrace meaningfulness varies. For

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example, adult experiential education is known for actively embracing the importance of meaningfulness in its design and pedagogical practices. Studies within this domain frequently employ a series of descriptors to capture the learner's experiences as 'meaningful', 'valued', 'worthwhile' (Hayllar, 2000), and delve into concepts such as 'peak experience' (Schoel et al., 1988), and 'meaningful connections' (Schwass et al., 2021).

Furthermore, an author of this paper has previously investigated meaningful learning through the notion of 'emotional highs', which was studied by examining lived experience of adult learners (Zeivots, 2016). In this research, an emotional high was defined as 'inner deep satisfaction a learner experiences when they have absorbed something meaningful' (p. 368). The findings highlighted several educational practices that fostered emotional high experiences for students: (1) invitation to explore, (2) facing the unknown, (3) escaping one's habits and routines, (4) perceptual sense of 'being pushed', and (5) safety and acceptance (Zeivots, 2018). Meaningful experiences in this context comprised active participation, the development of learners' agency and a safe space to personalise learning. Their research revealed that the learner retrospectively must see the necessity and worth of being in the learning experience for it to be perceived as meaningful (Zeivots, 2018).

Surprisingly, when we turned our attention to the literature in higher education (HE), studies focusing on meaningfulness were scarce (e.g. De Ruyter, 2002), and the notion of meaningfulness often remained an ill-defined concept, frequently interpreted from a teacher-centric perspective. As the HE sector grapples with disruptions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, universities worldwide are compelled to reimagine their relevance to students and what constitutes meaningful learning in HE.

In the context of this paper, we are underpinned by the notions of 'emotional high' (Zeivots, 2016) and 'high-impact practice' (Kuh, 2008) as well as ontological influences of Biesta (2016) and Gravett and Winstone (2022). The term 'learning high' is introduced to represent a conceptual framing for our study, and conceptualised by drawing together the literature and findings from this study. This framing aligns with the overarching theme of our research, exploring profound experiences that constitute meaningfulness in learning for postgraduate business students.

In a report investigating high-impact learning practices, Evans et al. (2015) emphasised that 'what comprises meaningful learning... needs to be explicit' (p. 8) and advocated for 'moving engagement agendas forward, [where] students and lecturers need agreement on what meaningful and quality learning experiences are and how these can best be provided' (p. 9). Our research responds to this call by identifying business students' perspectives on what they perceive as meaningful within the context of HE to inform educational development and design practices that foster authentic and transformative learning.

Central to our inquiry is *whose* meaningfulness we seek to explore. Biesta (2016) argued that one of the purposes of education is to help students engage with the world, acknowledging the importance of student experiences as distinct from societal, political, institutional, and pedagogical ideals. Our study focuses specifically on postgraduate coursework students, as prior studies in the postgraduate field often centre around research students. In this paper, our primary objective is to address

the question: *What kinds of learning experiences do postgraduate business students find meaningful in higher education?* Through four focus groups ($n=18$), we asked students to identify their most meaningful and memorable learning experiences in relation to specific postgraduate business subjects. Our analysis revealed that the meaningful learning experiences identified by students encompassed three elements: real-world connections, social encounters, and productive challenges.

In our discussion, we critically examine the usage of the term ‘meaningful’ in HE, drawing comparisons between our interpretation of student data and the existing literature. Building upon prior research conducted by the first author, we propose the concept of ‘learning highs’ as a new, tentative conceptual framework to guide future investigations into learning situations where meaningful experiences are pivotal. By introducing the term ‘learning highs’, we aim to provide a focused and tangible conceptualisation of learner-centred approaches that can advance the discourse on meaningful learning experiences. We believe that conceptualising learning highs will have practical implications for supporting educational development practices that foster meaningful learning in HE.

Literature review

The concept of meaningfulness is commonly discussed in relation to human psychology and wellbeing. Baumeister et al. (2013) define meaningfulness as ‘both a cognitive and an emotional assessment of whether one’s life has purpose and value’ (p. 506). The authors conclude, based on a comprehensive survey, that the concepts of meaningfulness and happiness are interrelated yet have distinct differences. While satisfying one’s needs and achieving success in life can bring happiness, this may not be sufficient for a meaningful life. Meaningfulness is experienced across time, integrating the past, present, and future, whereas happiness is conceptualised as something biological and primarily a feeling of the moment that is largely disconnected from other moments. This study’s intriguing finding was that an easy life might lead to feelings of happiness, while challenges and adversity can contribute to meaningfulness in life.

Conceptualising meaningfulness in higher education

Meaningful is a common and overarching term in HE (Barman et al., 2016); however, the lack of clarity in its application necessitates a critical revisit. Meaningfulness can be experienced in different ways in different contexts (Peters et al., 2021). For the purposes of this article, we examined learning situations in HE that students experienced as meaningful. We excluded studies that referred to meaningfulness in a limited sense in terms of comprehension, perception, and recall. In our literature review, a clear definition of meaningfulness in HE remained elusive, with many studies employing the term superficially or borrowing the definition from other domains. For example, Azila-Gbettor et al. (2022) define meaningfulness in HE as ‘the extent to which students consider their studies to be generally important and

worthwhile' (p. 263). However, they draw on the work of Hackman and Oldham (1975), whose study focuses on work satisfaction rather than students finding meaningfulness in their studies.

Studies in HE often combine meaningfulness with other concepts. For example, exploring the relationship between finding meaningfulness in learning and self-efficacy (Vogel & Human-Vogel, 2016), student identity development (Vogel & Human-Vogel, 2018), peer support (Fakunmoju et al., 2016), and how meaningfulness in life impact on students' psychological wellbeing (Aswini & Deb, 2017; Bano, 2014). Some studies establish a connection between meaningfulness in HE and the opportunities to participate in authentic learning contexts (Human-Vogel & Dippenaar, 2013) and work-integrated learning (Kligyte et al., 2022; Nevison et al., 2017), which is deemed to correlate with a decrease in the number of students who discontinue their studies.

We further encountered challenges in identifying relevant literature on meaningfulness in business education. Among a scarce literature in business education (e.g. Robbins, 1994; van Heugten et al., 2020), several studies endeavour to conceptualise meaningful learning through distinct approaches. Saiia et al. (2008) outline 'the DNA of meaningful learning' in the context of management education (p. 168) by identifying four states of meaningful learning: transaction, captivation, activation, and gestation. They strive to analyse the processes responsible for these states and the resulting outcomes. Although this work has influenced our conceptualisation of meaningfulness, its underlying ontological assumptions appear to resemble a standardised model which is quantifiable and replicable. Their framework prioritises the educator and would benefit from further testing and feedback from students.

Kuh's (2008) study conceptualises meaningful learning as 'high-impact practices'. These practices include five elements: (1) purposeful tasks that demand students to devote considerable time and effort, (2) student interaction with peers and university, (3) purposeful contact with people different to themselves, (4) frequent feedback about their performance, and (5) opportunities to see how what they are learning works in different settings, on and off campus. Kuh suggests university learning is meaningful only when it is 'both valued by society and empowering to the individual' (p. 12). He argues that contemporary metrics of student success should capture the reality of high-impact practices, which includes persistence, completion rates and importantly the evidence about the quality of meaningful learning. Similarly, Evans et al. (2015) approaches meaningful learning in HE through the frame of 'high-impact practices'. The authors define high-impact pedagogies as encouraging student behaviours leading to 'meaningful learning gains' (p. 11). These two studies provide insight on learning gains and high-impact practices; however, it remains unclear what makes these experiences meaningful from a student perspective. Meaningfulness in these studies is used as a somewhat ambiguous, one-size-fits-all concept, which requires further elaboration.

As the present study explores the meaningful experiences of postgraduate students, particular attention was paid to literature derived from this cohort. Such research often portrays the postgraduate experience through isolation (van den Berg & Mudau, 2022), a sense of being outsiders and limited social interactions (Zeivots, 2021). We observed that the approach to meaningful learning for postgraduate

students can vary depending on the field. For instance, nursing postgraduate students may view reflective practices as meaningful (Dreifuerst, 2015), while in chemistry meaningfulness may be perceived through assessments (Rootman-le Grange & Blackie, 2018). Although the research on postgraduate students is limited, Koh (2017) identifies five dimensions—active, constructive, intentional, authentic, and collaborative—that promote meaningful learning experiences in an online Master’s programme. Similarly, in a postgraduate course, Garcia et al. (2017) found that collaboration with other students and teachers was associated with meaningful learning, while students’ active involvement and assumption of responsibility contributed to more meaningful learning experiences. These findings align with recent literature (Fan et al., 2023; Singh, 2019), emphasising the importance of teacher–student exchange in influencing meaningful learning, reflection, and student engagement. The aforementioned studies have served as a foundation for the conceptualisation of meaningful learning experiences in the context of this study.

Methodology

This qualitative study (Jones et al., 2013) collected data from students in four large postgraduate subjects in a Master of Commerce course at a large Australian university. Each of the three researchers conducting this study worked as a lecturer in educational development, co-designing and developing subjects in teams as part of a strategic initiative called the Connected Learning at Scale (Wilson et al., 2021). The subjects of this study were selected because the researchers actively engaged with them as part of their educational development practice. The authors oversaw the subject redesign process, which included stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation. The researchers inquired about the most memorable and meaningful student experiences to positively influence future iterations of the subject redesign and the development of new business school subjects.

Data were collected during the first semester of 2021, when studies were conducted online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The subjects reflect key disciplinary specialisations in business education: marketing, business analytics, international business, and innovation and management. These subjects had large cohorts ranging from 75 to 1500 students, with a high proportion of international students. Despite the disciplinary differences, we collected data uniformly across all four subjects. The University’s Human Ethics Research Committee granted permission [protocol number: 2019/892] to collect student data.

As perceptions of meaningful experiences are subjective, we deemed that a qualitative methodology was most aligned with our research question (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). We targeted a group of postgraduate business learners as one step towards conceptualising meaningful learning within a particular kind of cohort. All students from the four subjects were sent an email invitation to take part in a focus group, along with the participant information. The focus groups were conducted over Zoom during the final weeks of either semester one or two in 2021, and each session lasted for 60 min. An evaluator, who was not one of the researchers, facilitated the focus groups. Focus groups facilitated the exploration

of rich experiences. A qualitative question in four focus groups (one per subject) was used to collect data. For the purposes of this study, we asked students: *What has been the most memorable and meaningful learning experience you had in this unit? Please tell us what it was, and what made it memorable and meaningful?* In total, 18 students participated in the focus groups (Table 1).

The four focus group conversations were transcribed by outsourced professional transcription services, and the researchers collectively conducted a thematic analysis of this data. To identify a preliminary set of codes, each member coded the data individually using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). In a second cycle of coding, data were annotated using highlights and comments. The researchers then met as a group to discuss and cross-reference their interpretations to validate each other's coding, identify commonalities, and clarify differences of interpretation. These meetings were aided with a virtual whiteboard to visually map and organise emerging themes across iterative refinements. Through this socially discursive process, the authors ultimately derived three primary themes.

Findings

Data analysis revealed three themes concerning meaningful learning experiences for postgraduate business students. Firstly, students associated meaningful learning with relevant real-world connections. A second theme comprised learning experiences with meaningful social encounters. Finally, the third theme explored productive challenges. We present themes with care to ensure that the student voice from the data is evident in their own words throughout the four subjects. While the themes are presented separately for clarity, the concepts that arose from student responses are deeply interrelated in practice. In this section, we identify the themes, note the most pertinent interconnections, and analyse the interrelations further in the “[Discussion](#)” section. The quotes highlighted here were chosen from the larger dataset as they represent the vivid and well-conceptualised comments to convey the theme. We note that there were also other comments where the themes were expressed more implicitly.

Table 1 The sample from four Master of Commerce subjects

Subject discipline	Postgraduate level	Number of students	Number of focus group participants
International business (FG01)	First-year postgraduate	377	Five (three females, two males)
Marketing (FG02)	Second-year postgraduate	403	Two (two females)
Business analytics (FG03)	First-year postgraduate	1040	Nine (five females, four males)
Strategy, innovation and management (FG04)	First-year postgraduate	78	Two (two males)

Real-world connections

Students' responses revealed the meaningfulness of real-world connections as a key theme. The significance of real-world connections primarily centred on three areas. Firstly, students described meaningful real-world connections between the skills and concepts they had learned and their careers. For example, one student noted:

I find the most meaningful thing is the data visualisation. Because now I'm working in an NGO and I'm using those skills that I learnt in this course to actually visualise our clients' data. And how we write that in our annual report. (FG03)

Another student emphasised the significance of authentic cases in facilitating the connection between theory and practice. This student reflected:

We actually make the real-world case to the academic level, to analyse [it] through knowledge. So we can see what we should do if we start our own business in future. (FG04)

Similarly, students found it meaningful to acquire data literacy and research skills that they could apply in future real-world contexts. Another student observed that online video resources, such as how to conduct literature research on specific industry cases, were significant:

That helped me a lot, because... I never think we can use the library website in that way. So after I learned how to do research on certain industry or certain company, I can just do my own research in future. For example, if I want to open up a business for some kind of industry, I can use our library resource to see all the data... about this industry. (FG04)

The second area within this theme related to students' experiences of strong real-world connections between disciplinary content (skills and understandings) and their personal lives. In a marketing subject, students particularly appreciated assessments designed to support clear connections between disciplinary theory and everyday experiences. For example, an assessment in which students compiled weekly online examples related to a corresponding theory topic, was seen as meaningful. Two different students in the same subject noted,

I did slides for this assessment, and I think I show each part of my life by using the consumer behaviour knowledge. I think, during this period, I feel very, very engaged, and the knowledge is very – I won't say 'useful', but I don't know [an]other verb. It built a firm connection for me to link the marketing itself to my real life. (FG02)

While shopping, some of what I have learned... may help me buy goods and observe how the brand treats its consumers, which makes the class on consumer behaviour a fascinating one. (FG02)

A final area related to students perceiving a sense of realness and honesty in their interactions with others while learning. For example, a student recognised the

teacher's capacity to 'be real with you' (FG02) as meaningful. The student further noted:

Sometimes I feel university teachers ... they don't like it when you are too honest. You kind of go, 'I don't think that's true'. And they'd be like, well, that's what the statement says, 'the shareholders are this and this'. You're like, I'm not trying to argue with you, I'm just telling you my opinion. (FG02)

This reflection related to the development of critical thinking skills. The student appreciated the teacher's capacity to be authentic when facilitating a discussion and to encourage students to look beyond superficial statements, to question, and to critique the 'real' motivations of companies (FG04).

Social encounters

A second theme emerged in relation to social encounters. Student appreciation for human interaction, including student-to-student and student-to-teacher discussions, was frequently evident. Most memorable experiences linked to synchronous tutorials and interactive discussions. Although the online delivery varied across the subjects, what stood out was the student desire for even the slightest social interaction:

Since we cannot communicate face-to-face [and] offline, every communication was important to me. (FG01)

In one instance, a student referred to 'face-to-face tutorials' (FG01) as their most meaningful learning experience. Intriguingly, tutorials in this subject were held fully online. 'Face-to-face' classes likely appeared to be synonymous with synchronous classes due to perceived similarity of experiences, where students interacted with tutors and fellow students. Further discussing memorable experiences, students occasionally referred to seemingly mundane social situations:

Sometimes, we would just chat, just talk about our group assignment and something else, everything. That's memorable for me. (FG01)

In this instance, the process was deemed more memorable than the final product. The fact that talking about 'everything' was perceived as memorable indicates that social interactions are at the core of meaningful learning, and they cannot be taken for granted.

Three out of six FG01 participants indicated that interactive panel discussions were their most meaningful learning experiences. These panel discussions were a series of professionally pre-recorded videos with four industry experts sharing their perspectives on a weekly topic. The discussions provided an engaging way to connect with a topic that had more human- than content-centred value for some students:

[it's] about what you can learn from the experienced individual instead of the content. (FG01)

The panel discussion videos were meaningful as they provided human-interactivity and opportunities to listen digitally and interact with experts. Yet, at times there was still a preference for face-to-face classes, which were not permitted during the COVID-19 lockdowns:

The human element was missing... there could've been a face-to-face lecture, and that would've helped a lot. (FG01)

Social encounters required more than simply being surrounded by people; what mattered was the quality and interaction with the social environment. Students were able to better personalise and participate in learning activities when they interacted with peers, particularly when dealing with novel and complex topics. Digital social interactions provided support for students in their exploration of course content, which was identified as meaningful. An international student conveyed their meaningful learning experience:

When people express their ideas online in the online tutorial, I will listen first, compare their ideas with mine, then speak out my mind. (FG01)

In another instance, descriptors of meaningful experiences included a sense of collective effort and belonging to, and participation in, a community.

[The tutor is] really engaging in the class, like calling out on specific people to engage in the discussions... At least all of us [are] participating and for him let[ting] us know when we're wrong is good, which happens quite often... the whole classroom is involved ... that's a really good aspect. (FG01)

Productive challenges

The third theme to emerge related to productive challenges. Our analysis indicated that students valued activities that challenged them or promoted deeper thinking. Students appreciated the opportunity to go beyond surface-level analysis in case studies and found it more meaningful to explore processes and reasons behind events. Learning became more memorable by questioning the motives and consequences of decisions. One student appreciated the process of deeper exploration of a case study:

We can be a little more critical about it and go, 'Is that real? Do they genuinely mean that? Is that the actual part of their mission statement? Is management really shifting the strategy towards that? If they are, how have they done that? Have they really changed their supply chain, have they reduced the need for printing?' So we have that other layer of discussion. (FG04)

This student expressed the need for a boundary around deeper exploration, so that excessive questioning did not result in unhelpful scepticism, but rather provided a balanced view of the situation. The student continued:

[The teacher] saying OK, let's not get too real. Because once you become too sceptical, then everything is just a charade. It's not a good feeling to

leave class, knowing that the world is in a dark burning place in the background, and you're trying to be happy... [the teacher] does really well, if he can be [in] that role of the facilitator, but at the same time be real with you. (FG04)

This excerpt illustrates that students required guidance when engaging in challenging discussions or conducting in-depth exploration of ideas. This relates to the facilitator's role who creates an environment where students feel comfortable exploring a case deeply, knowing when to curb the exploration to maintain a balance. Interestingly, this excerpt highlights the interconnectedness of the themes by linking the real-world connections (appreciation for the challenge of uncovering the 'real' case context by deconstructing surface understanding) and social encounters (the challenging situation's benefits were realised through discursive interactions with the facilitator).

Further underscoring of the interrelated themes demonstrates that the notion of in-depth exploration is linked to authentic application of skills. For one student, deeper exploration involved questioning real-world situations, revealing a complex and interconnected process. In their meaningful learning experience, the student questioned the alignment between the corporations' public statements and their actual practice:

The whole point of me in this class is ok, how are they doing that? What is their strategy? Is simply hiring more women going to change that? You know, are they going to do something else, like are they promoting more women? What is the actual internal strategy for that? That's [the] whole point for us, when we get into that position of power and influence, these are the strategies that I'm going to implement... A little bit more real-life application skills would be great. (FG04)

This experience highlights that when students engage with authentic case studies, they should be able to connect them to their future careers. In this sense the classroom activity became meaningful because it equipped students with skills they could apply. Similarly, another student reported that through deep exploration of real cases, they gained a practical understanding of skill application, making their learning meaningful:

To see the different cases and to analyse why they are success[ful]. And to learn from them, to give an academic definition to those... innovations, what they're like, [their] mindset, management, what's the difference between those innovations? (FG04)

Opportunities where students can use higher order thinking skills are memorable in two ways. Firstly, students made connections to real-world situations by learning how to apply classroom skills to their future careers (explained above). Secondly, students utilised past experiences to facilitate deeper exploration. For example, one student connected their prior experience with the new subject concepts and applied them in a reflective assignment:

I don't have much experience of [a] management position. I was President of [anonymised] Student Association, before my Bachelor degree. But that's pretty limited, comparing to an organisation or company. So I tried my best to link my experience to what we learn for this unit. So it brings me a lot of thinking. (FG04)

According to this comment, a meaningful learning experience in the classroom involved the student's ability to establish connections between what they learn and their past (or future) experiences. This type of exercise, due to its challenging nature and ability to prompt deeper thinking, can become meaningful.

Limitations

We note potential limitations to our study. The focus group question was asked as part of a broader focus group that considered other aspects of the learning experience in the subject. We suggest that future research should be designed using a stand-alone question to see if this allows for richer discussions. We also note that a doubled-barrelled question was asked covering two concepts: meaningful and memorable. The reason for including the term memorable was to prompt students to share significant experiences. However, this could be problematic if both terms are treated as synonymous. We are unable to verify the students' interpretation of the term.

Discussion

The themes discussed in the “**Findings**” section appeared to be intertwined and separating them was problematic due to their interdependence. Certain themes influenced one another; for example, productive challenges were frequently linked to real-world connections, as the application to authentic contexts introduced complexity and uncertainty that were perceived as both challenging and rewarding.

The purpose of this work is to explore how these findings contribute to theoretical understandings of meaningful learning experiences in HE and inform the design and implementation of practical activities that foster meaningful learning. In this section, we propose the following contributions to knowledge:

- Problematising meaningfulness;
- Promoting real connections;
- Conceptualising learning highs.

Problematising meaningfulness

The term meaningful, while widely used in educational literature, still lacks precision. From the literature review on meaningful learning, we observe that evaluating meaningful student experiences in HE is highly desirable; however, such practices

are rather uncommon and often refer to imported ontological assumptions of meaningfulness from other domains. Further elaboration is required to explore the components of meaningful learning in HE, and incorporate a broader range of evidence and application methods that situate meaningfulness in HE contexts.

The challenge stems from the term's multiple interpretations and ongoing transformation. In addition to having different layers, including the personal, experiential, social, epistemic, and cultural (Bretz, 2001; De Ruyter, 2002; Goldhammer, 1977; Matengu et al., 2019; McGregor et al., 2015), meaningfulness is entangled in socio-cultural practices and can differ between contexts. Neglecting these multiple dimensions makes it challenging to theorise meaningfulness per se, as it can result in a generic model.

In this study, we placed meaningfulness in the context of postgraduate student experiences in business education which assisted us with illuminating features of meaningful learning. For example, a meaningful learning experience in a marketing subject might be different from a finance subject. Both experiences are perceived as meaningful and memorable; however, we argue that what matters is the situations in which students find them meaningful. We note that meaningfulness should be approached less as a broad description and more as a phenomenon inherent to the learning experience and situated connections (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). There is a need for a term that addresses these challenges and enables scholars and practitioners to investigate and capture impactful learning experiences deemed meaningful by students.

Promoting real connections

We observed that meaningful experiences were strongly associated with a sense of realness for students. The university is a reified environment where theory and content can be abstracted in the attempt to distil concepts for students. It was at times difficult to grasp what 'realness' meant to business students, and how teachers could assist students in conveying the messy complexity of the real into the classroom. Experiences of realness were frequently regarded as moments where genuine connections between university and personal experience were made. This is similar to the work on connected learning (Peters et al., 2021) where connections are established across different contexts, such as formal and informal learning situations. Such real-world connections were experienced in various ways across different subjects, but a commonality was how these instances seemed to possess a sense of proximity, where a closeness was established through connections being generated—connections to disciplinary content, with others, and with oneself as a learner.

Students valued learning activities that enabled them to create real connections between the content and their life, including career. Students felt supported in making connections between theory and practice when they encountered relevant and contemporary examples from the 'real-world' that they could relate to in an academic context (Human-Vogel & Dippenaar, 2013). For example, a case study discussion of a well-known company was meaningful as it served as a relatable for students within the context of their everyday lives. The teacher was able to facilitate

class discourse to delve beneath surface understandings and get students thinking critically about the company's real strategy, as opposed to their publicly professed strategy. Students found theory and content to be less meaningful if not contextualised by lived experience of practitioners, whether that be teachers facilitating critical discussion or industry experts sharing insights from their practice.

Similarly, meaningful experiences were characterised by real connections with others. Students ascribed meaningfulness to the quality of their interactions and relationships with both educators and peers during their study, particularly when these interactions were perceived to possess a level of authenticity. This aligns with what Gravett and Winstone (2022) call meaningful connections and is consistent with Biesta's (2016) idea that meaningfulness always exists in social practices. For someone to become *real*, they need to be 'taken up by others in ways that are necessarily beyond [their] control and [their] intentions' (p. xi). Biesta (2016) argues that education is about *having* a social environment as opposed to just *being in* a social environment. Put differently, it is not one's being in an educational context that makes it meaningful, but the quality of the participation. Our findings identified a similar pattern where realness was generated through links with others that brought a sense of authenticity to students' engagement with the learning activities and material.

We noted that meaningful experiences were also associated with a connection with oneself as a learner. Reflective opportunities, whether self-reflection prompted by an assignment task, or reflection spurred by discursive encounters with others, were often regarded as meaningful and potentially conducive to the consolidation of students' experiences into profound learning.

It is important to note that the subjects reviewed in this study were delivered online due to COVID-19 lockdowns. This context adds an additional layer to the assessment of realness which is likely to impact postgraduate students' experiences and perceptions. For example, in a context where most learning is digitally mediated, social encounters that seem to break through the 'simple transactional relationship' (Kennedy et al., 2021, p. 4) can be more valued and lead to higher engagement (Fan et al., 2023).

Conceptualising learning highs

The notion of meaningful learning within education has various interpretations and definitions, meaning different things to different people. Intuitively as educators we know that we want students to have meaningful experiences that they find valuable and transformative. However, a unifying definition of meaningful learning remains absent in the scholarly discourse. Drawing on the prior work on emotional highs (Zeivots, 2016, 2018), high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008), and meaningful learning gains (Evans et al., 2015), we anticipated that similar phenomena might emerge from our dataset. Specifically, we expected students to discern emotionally heightened and impactful moments that were pivotal in their learning journeys. Yet when asked about meaningful learning, our overall impression was that students were not primed to consider such concepts and experiences in HE.

Our findings revealed specific themes, including real-world connections, social encounters, and productive challenges, that students perceived as meaningful learning experiences. These themes align with previous research on emotional highs (Zeivots, 2018) and high-impact experiences characterised by distinct practices (Kuh, 2008). While this connection between findings and literature is prominent, we identified gaps in the HE literature where the notion of meaningfulness is still ill-defined and often interpreted from a teacher-centric perspective.

Considering the lack of clarity around the concept of meaningfulness, we propose a new direction that builds on emotional highs (Zeivots, 2016) in adult education and applies these learnings to a HE context. In adult education, these transformative and satisfying emotional highs were found to be associated with conquering challenges and related to the forming of distinct viewpoints, attitudes, and values through social interactions. Our findings mirror this, with real-world connections enabling students to tie classroom learning to their future careers, social encounters fostering interaction, and productive challenges promoting deeper thinking.

We suggest transposing this original concept into the context of formal learning in business education and HE more broadly through the new term, 'learning highs'. We see that conceptualising learning highs as a frame to apply in future research could help circumvent issues caused by the ubiquitous, yet imprecise term meaningful. This concept also aligns with the five elements conceptualised as meaningful learning by Kuh (2008), such as purposeful tasks, student interaction, and opportunities to see learning in different settings. It also resonates with the need for clarity in defining what comprises meaningful learning, as emphasised by Evans et al. (2015).

We propose to characterise learning highs as memorable experiences in which learners feel enriched, expanded, and developed. As a tentative definition, we see learning highs as strongly engaging and pivotal experiences, embedded in one's practice, that a learner relates to in educational contexts. These experiences can span across time, integrating the past, present, and future (Baumeister et al., 2013). This definition could prove particularly beneficial in conducting qualitative studies that explore student-centred experiences in social learning environments, expanding upon the educational practices highlighted in Zeivots et al., (2023).

To clarify, the concept of learning highs does not intend to replace the term meaningfulness in education. Instead, we propose that utilising the frame of learning highs in future research might bypass the ill-defined or one-size-fits-all approach often taken to discuss the meaningfulness. This new frame reimagines the discussion of meaningfulness and provides an ontological conceptualisation for tackling educational situations where meaningful experiences *matter*. As a result, this conceptualisation provides practitioners and researchers with a practical, human-centred scaffold to enrich debates about meaningful learning experiences. We argue that using the proposed term 'high' can assist learners to identify experiences that are among the most memorable, unique, and meaningful (rather than extreme). We trust that this provisional definition will provide scholars and practitioners with a valuable and tangible foundation for subsequent research.

Conclusion

In this paper, we addressed the research question: what kinds of learning experiences do postgraduate business students find meaningful in higher education? Our review of the literature showed that meaningfulness in HE is often employed as an overarching, multi-faceted term with limited clarity, applicability, and depth regarding its specific meaning and operationalisation. We advocate for educators and educational developers to be mindful of the overarching use of the term ‘meaningful’ and instead strive for a more purposeful application. Our study examined the findings from postgraduate business student data on the kind of learning experiences they find meaningful. To identify the kinds of educational settings in which meaningful learning occurs, we distilled three primary themes: real-world connections, social encounters, and productive challenges. Understanding the importance of these dimensions will aid the development of student-centred learning that is deemed to be meaningful in HE. Further, our study highlights the necessity to reimagine how meaningful learning is conceptualised in HE. To address this concern, we propose further investigations to foster the understanding of transformative, satisfying, and productive student experiences that generate conditions conducive to meaningful learning. Such experiences should maximise social interaction and present productive challenges. Moreover, we suggest that future research on meaningful learning should build on the concept of learning highs as a frame for HE. By doing so, we hope that this line of research will serve two essential purposes: (1) provide a practical and human-centred approach to learning design and educational development that is meaningful for students, supporting scholars and educators with valuable insights, and (2) assist students in recognising and embracing meaningful experiences within their learning journeys.

While this study lays the foundation for reimagining meaningful learning in HE, we envision that our findings will inform the design of more authentic and transformative learning experiences in the future. By incorporating our insights into learning design practices, educators can create more meaningful and enriching educational opportunities for students. For a more comprehensive understanding, we also recommend further research with postgraduate and undergraduate students, and within different disciplinary fields. This approach will provide a broader perspective on what constitutes meaningful experiences in HE.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no competing or conflicting interests with regard to this paper.

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