



## Interview with Michelle Walter

*Michelle Walter is a PhD student in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne. Her research takes an auto-ethnographic approach to understand university students' mental health help-seeking behaviour. She is passionate about the issue of student mental health.*

### *If you are comfortable doing so, would you share with us a bit about your experiences?*

I actually became sick when I was 13, and continued being ill with depression, anxiety and eating disorder. So I was probably my ill-est in Year 12 and my first two years of university and it's episodic, so it's continuous.

### *What helped you continue with your studies?*

Well like a lot of students who come to the university of Melbourne, my entire identity was caught up with academics and academic performance, and while I did occasionally consider abandoning what I was doing I couldn't quite bring myself to do it, and I decided to stay for reasons such as – I love learning basically and I wanted to keep going, and I kept hoping that the next subject would be the one that would get me.

### *What would you say are the main protective factors or exacerbating factors for you at university?*

Funnily enough the answer to that question – to both questions is the same and that's the tutors. The negative experiences I had was about teachers who made fun of you, teachers who treated you like you were just a stupid, privileged and lucky to be there, and tutors who were obviously so uninterested in what they were doing or connecting with students. And then on the flipside I had tutors who in my undergraduate and in my Masters and now luckily in my PhD who made the extra time, who obviously put effort into classes, who would make meeting times, who would talk to me like I was a person, and I am currently only in this position, I am only doing my PhD because I had a teacher who was interested and asked me to do it. So it was that engagement.

I am not suggesting that every single teacher needs to spend 100% of their time engaging with students, but when you have teachers who are actively negative about the student body they are teaching, it's so disheartening and it's just – it doesn't make you want to go to class and it doesn't make you respect the teachers, and it makes you feel absolutely awful.

### *Would you say that academic teachers are not well-equipped to promote student mental health?*

I think that's true but I also think that there's this misunderstanding that they all have to be wonderfully equipped with mental health knowledge, what they need to be equipped with is an understanding of their position as a teacher, which is incredibly powerful and to just treat their students like people, to be respectful and kind and challenging, that's enough.

**Michelle Walter**

Tutor, PhD Candidate

Melbourne School of Graduate Education, University of Melbourne