

# The role of academic educators in supporting student mental health: Can academic teachers make a difference?

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# University students are a 'high risk' population for mental health difficulties



**ONE IN FIVE**



**1** out of every **FOUR** people needs mental health care *THIS* year.  
- National Institute of Mental Health

## What are we talking about?

- **Mental health**
  - encompasses a range of mental health states, from diagnosable mental illness and mental health difficulties at one end of the spectrum, to mental wellbeing and a state of flourishing at the other
- **Mental wellbeing**
  - a positive state of psychological and emotional health; indicating that a person is able to function cognitively and emotionally in a manner that is productive and fulfilling
- **Psychological distress**
  - refers to the presence of symptoms associated with negative psychological or emotional states, including depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms or unhealthy levels of stress
- **Mental health difficulties**
  - refers to experiences of mental health problems or mental ill-health.

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## Is university study contributing to students' psychological distress?



## supporting uni student mental health



What is student mental health and wellbeing? Is it:

- a) A matter for health professionals
- b) Something students themselves must address
- c) A matter for university services
- d) An issue that academic educators need to address
- e) All of the above?

## The role of academic educators in supporting student mental health?

'Student mental health? It's a no brainer'

'I wish someone would worry about *my* mental health?'

'I can't do one more thing; I don't want to; I shouldn't have to'

'It's not my job to make students happy'

'Responsibilisation is a key strategy of neoliberal governance'

'*Why can't they understand that they have a duty of care?*'

## Student mental health is a teaching and learning issue

**Teach**  
**Learn**

## What is NOT the role of academic educators?

- a) Making students happy
- b) Counselling students
- c) Telling students how to live their lives
- d) Promoting commercial products and health 'remedies'
- e) All of the above



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## What IS the role of academic educators?

- a) Creating engaging and inclusive learning environments
- b) Designing curricula experiences that facilitate student learning
- c) Demonstrating interest in students' academic goals and progress
- d) Referring students experiencing difficulties to appropriate professional services
- e) All of the above

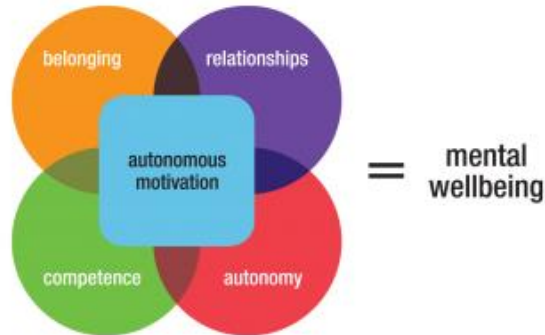


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## Intentionally supporting wellbeing: M-BRAC

*experiences of being recognised and valued by others and of sharing experiences and goals with others*

*Acting on the basis of our interests and intrinsic values*



*feeling that you are good at what you do or at least can become good at it*

*feelings that you are doing what you choose and want to be doing (are acting authentically)*

## What are educators doing? Rethinking curriculum

### 2.5 Good practice examples: Redesigning curriculum

The following case studies offer examples of curriculum designers rethinking how to better support students' mental wellbeing. In each case, the innovation described was designed to address signs that substantial numbers of students were experiencing psychological distress – signs such as:

- students appearing to be disengaged, overwhelmed or emotionally 'fragile'
- students under-performing, or being unable to cope with challenging or unfamiliar tasks
- students exhibiting high levels of anxiety about course requirements or results
- students feeling isolated and disconnected, with high absenteeism and attrition.

<p><u>Practical legal training</u> Grad. Dip. of Legal Practice <i>Australian National University</i></p>	<p><u>First year program</u> Bachelor of Medicine <i>Monash University</i></p>	<p><u>Capstone Practicum</u> Bachelor of Education <i>QUT</i></p>
<p><u>Interior Design</u> Bachelor of Design <i>QUT</i></p>	<p><u>3rd Year Music Theatre</u> Bachelor of Fine Arts <i>Victorian College of the Arts</i></p>	<p><u>First Year Biology</u> Bachelor of Science <i>University of Melbourne</i></p>

## Developing wellbeing-supportive teaching practice

Large Group Classes	Encouraging students to use consultation time wisely	Helping students with self-care and help seeking	Sparking student interest in the subject early on
Small Group Teaching	Motivating students to attend weekly classes	Encouraging a community of sharing and pride among students	Helping students develop insight in their learning
Capstone Experiences	Fostering peer group support & feedback in class	Helping students to draw on earlier course learning experiences	
Online courses	Encouraging students to use the discussion forum	Furthering students thinking on important topics	To create a sense of connection and relatedness online
Professional Practice	Motivating students during placement	Reframing 'failure' as an important learning opportunity	Mitigating students' anxieties during placement

## No easy answers

- + 1. Does concern for student mental wellbeing require curriculum designers to exclude materials, topics and perspectives that may be distressing for some students?
- + 2. Educational research shows that high stakes assessment (e.g., 100% exams) and normative grading undermine autonomous motivation and produce psychological distress. Should curriculum designers eliminate high stakes assessment and grading?
- + 3. Setting group assignments in the first year is a good way of helping students develop positive peer relationships and feel a sense of connectedness or belonging. True or false?
- + 4. Is student mental wellbeing supported by offering lots of choices for assignment topics or letting students develop their own topics?
- + 5. Student mental wellbeing would improve if academic standards were lower and it was easier for students to pass. True or false?
- + 6. Is student mental wellbeing supported by assessing students regularly using low-value tasks?
- + 7. Autonomous motivation is fostered by including work placements and internships in the curriculum. True or false?

## Do intentional changes make a difference? Research says yes

- Major curriculum initiatives to promote student wellbeing in medical (e.g., Slavin et al., 2014; Slavin et al., 2012) and legal education (e.g., Tang & Ferguson, 2014) have shown that high quality education need not be psychologically distressing for students
- Key strategies in both fields include:
  - Providing competency assessments and feedback on student work, rather than normative grading
  - Allowing students greater flexibility in how they approach tasks or the topics they study
  - Streamlining the traditional curriculum content and reducing contact hours to increase space for personal time and other commitments
  - Equipping students with skills to manage stress, uncertainty, unknowns and conflicts
  - Supporting students to find meaning and positivity in the tasks they are required to undertake

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## Can small changes make a difference? Students say yes

- *What can be done to improve student wellbeing? (or 'what can the school of X do to improve student wellbeing?')*
- In a 2013 UOM study, 2,525 students made 3,732 discrete recommendations for improving student mental health
- Thematic data analysis identified 7 major categories:
  1. Academic teachers and teaching practice - 37.2% of respondents
    - Teacher attributes; teaching practices; support for student learning
  2. Student services and support – 27.3%
    - Increase and improve support services including career advice
  3. Environment, culture and communications – 24.7%
    - Improve spaces for and culture among students; increase health promotion
  4. Course design – 15.5%
    - Workload; support for practical placements
  5. Program administration – 11.3%
    - Flexibility in timetabling, course planning; reduce course costs
  6. Assessment – 10.1%
    - Improve clarity, weighting, timing, choice in assessment
  7. Student society activities – 9.3%
    - Make social activities more inclusive and varied

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## Suggestions for teachers

- Address teacher attributes, knowledge of students & interactions
  - *'Sometimes it's hard to approach lecturers without feeling like they are judging you for not keeping up'* (Vet)
  - *'I would appreciate an attempt on the part of lecturers to engage with students' interests'* (Law)
  - *'Teachers can sometimes seem a bit dismissive or even condescending when providing 'help' to 'first years' and this can sometimes be a little off-putting for younger students in regards to asking for assistance or advice'* (Science)
  - *'It would be better if lecturers were not stressed out by their own workloads: its palpable when you try to approach them. Some Lecturers and Tutors could learn to be polite and not grouchy'* (Arts)
  - *'If there were more interactions with teachers, perhaps by assigning every student a 'mentor', someone who they see every few months to monitor their progress ... at this stage there are no teachers in my course who know me personally'* (Biomed)

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## Suggestions for teaching practice

- Improve teaching practices to communicate effectively and engage and motivate students
  - *'Sometimes it is hard to see the relevance of what we are being taught (not so much in third year but definitely in earlier years) - teaching staff could help motivate us by giving us an indication of where our learning is going'* (Biomed)
  - *'Teachers should speak slowly for anyone who doesn't keep up with the teaching process, especially for those international students'* (Eng)
  - *'Teachers/lecturers would be more interactive in lectures. I understand they have a lot to teach us but sometimes I do feel that I'm just constantly being talked at instead of engaged.'* (Science)
  - *'If teachers actually conveyed passion for what they teach and create a more personal experience, particularly in information dense subjects like history, to make the material more accessible'* (Arts)
  - *'would be good if we could be sent lecture notes and prac instructions BEFORE the lecture/prac so we can come prepared'* (Vet)

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## Support for student learning

- Improve support for individual student learning
  - [It would be good if...] *'teachers offered students feedback earlier in the semester'* (Law)
  - *'Teachers would spend more time assisting with assignments, providing feedback, actually reading drafts of work and meeting with students individually'* (Arts)
  - *'It would be great to be able to get more personal feedback on your progress from a teacher/lecturer you trusted but unfortunately that doesn't seem possible these days'* (Biomed)
  - *'Teachers should encourage students to ask questions rather than stopping students from asking because of time limits'* (Eng)
  - *'Teachers should make more of an effort to assist students when they ask for help, particularly if they request extra study material, or are not confident understanding topics. I have emailed coordinators numerous times, and have received very little help in response, if any at all'* (Science)

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## Common themes and stressors

- Students' suggestions reveal some common academic stressors
  - Feelings of not being 'recognised' or understood by academic teachers
  - Being made to feel unimportant, dim or incompetent by academic teachers
  - Teaching methods and materials that are uninspiring, dense, inaccessible
  - Being under-supported (under-resourced) to complete required tasks effectively
  - Feelings of social isolation or low sense of connection to cohort
  - Work overload and/or inflexibility in timing of tasks
  - Lack of clarity around expectations, standards and goals
  - Lack of flexibility/responsiveness in programming, timetabling

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