

Enhancing Student Wellbeing: Resources for University Educators

Project aims

Universities across Australia are increasingly aware of the need to mitigate and redress the high levels of psychological distress experienced by significant numbers of their students. Activity to date has focussed on developing tools and resources to develop students' mental health literacy and promote help-seeking. The challenge now is to build the capacity of academic educators to develop teaching and learning environments and practices that better support student mental wellbeing (SMW).

Academic educators are the drivers of innovation in university teaching and learning. The resources on this website offer comprehensive guidance for academic teachers and educational leaders interested to understand how and why particular curriculum choices or pedagogical approaches might support or undermine the psychological needs and academic outcomes of university students. By providing easily adaptable and transferable ideas for designing curriculum and assessment, and for fostering teaching and learning practices that support SMW, the learning modules and resources offered here will assist academic educators to promote mental health through the curriculum, not only *within* or alongside it.

The learning modules and resources aim to:

- Develop understanding among academic educators of the connections between aspects of curriculum design, the learning environment, and students' levels of psychological distress
- Provide guidance for ensuring that inadvertent, curriculum-based triggers of psychological distress are identified and minimised by academic teachers and program designers
- Offer a range of practical, transferable 'good practice' examples of curriculum design and teaching strategies that support SMW
- Support university educators to adapt and adopt strategies for supporting SMW in diverse academic programs and institutional contexts
- Build academic educators' capacity to maintain their own mental wellbeing and raise awareness of mental health literacy as a professional competency
- Support cross-institutional collaboration and sector-wide engagement to increase levels of student mental wellbeing.

Rationale: Why we need curriculum innovations designed to support students' mental health

Mental health is one of Australia's nine current 'National Health Priority Areas', having been identified for particular attention because of its significant contribution to the burden of illness and injury in the Australian community (AIHW). University students are a 'very high risk population' for psychological distress and mental disorders (Stallman, 2010: 254). For example, Stallman's study of nearly 6,500 students attending two major Australian universities found high levels of psychological distress (as assessed by the Kessler 10) in 84 percent of the participants, where only 29 percent of the overall Australian population report such levels (Stallman, 2010). Similarly, research conducted by the project leaders involving over 5000 students at The University of Melbourne in 2013 found that one in four university students reported severe levels of psychological distress as assessed by the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) (Larcombe et al, 2015). At these levels, students are likely to experience difficulties with daily activities such as sleeping or feeling rested, concentrating and reading effectively (Tang and Ferguson, 2014). Psychological distress and mental health difficulties during students' university years are not unique to Australia. Research in the United States (Eisenberg, Hunt and Speer, 2013), Turkey (Bayram and Bilgel, 2008) and Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2006) has similarly identified a significant burden of mental health problems among college and university students. These findings are consistent with surveys of university health and counselling services in the UK, USA and Australia that report increased student demand for assistance to address symptoms

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of psychological distress such as anxiety and depression (Erdur-Baker et al., 2006; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011; Stallman, 2008).

In short, there is a strong and expanding evidence base to support increasing concern about the prevalence and severity of mental health difficulties across university student populations. There is also evidence to suggest that academic study has a negative impact on wellbeing for some students: for example, commencing first year undergraduate students often report less distress than subsequent year students, indicating that the decline in student wellbeing occurs during the first year of university life and persists throughout the degree (Stallman, 2010; Larcombe et al, 2015). A study of youth across Australia examining responses to the longitudinal Life Patterns survey between 2007 and 2012 also found a decline in mental health levels while young people were engaged in higher education (Wierenga, Landstedt and Wyn, 2013). Especially as the costs of participation in higher education are increasing, it appears likely that university students will continue to experience rates of psychological distress that match or exceed those of their community peers.

For university educators and administrators, a pressing question raised by the mental health prevalence data concerns the role that universities and academic teachers do, can or should play in supporting students' psychological wellbeing. Given that a substantial proportion of students will experience mental health difficulties during their time at university, how can universities ensure they provide supportive and 'health-promoting' environments (Dooris et al, 2010)? A variety of interventions have been developed in recent years to support the mental wellbeing of tertiary students, including those developed through previous OLT funded programs. Most of these initiatives have targeted students directly with programs and resources to improve mental health literacy, build resilience, develop skills to self-identify and manage stress, and promote help-seeking (Kelly, Jorm and Wright, 2007; Stallman, 2011). These health promotion strategies are extremely important, but they do not reach all students in a university environment. In addition, improving the ability of individuals to cope with and manage stress only addresses one part of the picture of university student mental health; it is also important to reduce the stressors and promote protective factors in the university teaching and learning environment.

Curriculum reform and innovation to foster mental health has been limited to date, and often focused on 'making space' in the curriculum for 'mindfulness' or a similar stress management practice. Less attention has been paid to the opportunities to support student health through curriculum design and teaching practice. The exceptions here are medical and legal education where academic pioneers are embedding the principles of positive psychology (Slavin et al, 2011; Slavin, Schindler and Chibnall, 2014) and self-determination theory (Field, Duffy and Huggins, 2014; Krieger, 2008; Tang and Ferguson, 2014) in curriculum design at both a program-wide and classroom level. These innovations show promising signs of preventing the sharp increases in psychological distress typically recorded by medical (Slavin, Schindler and Chibnall, 2014) and law students (Townes O'Brien et al, 2011; Tang and Ferguson, 2014). Key elements of these approaches include a strong focus on competency-based assessment and professional identity formation; reduction and flexibility in academic workloads to ensure students can maintain work/life balance; helping students find motivation and meaning in their studies; and promoting stronger cooperative relationships between students and academic teachers. Importantly, the academic outcomes in the health-supporting programs are strong (Slavin, Schindler and Chibnall, 2014; Tang and Ferguson, 2014), indicating that the stressors embedded in conventional teaching and learning environments are not essential to academic learning.

As it is now known that mental health difficulties are not limited to university students in professional programs such as medicine and law (Bayram and Bilgel, 2008; Larcombe et al, 2015), it is important to adapt and implement the health-promoting curriculum innovations piloted in those disciplines in other academic fields and programs. This project provides tools, resources and strategies for that task.