



Interview with Professor Richard James

Richard James is Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and Director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. He is a leading figure in Australian higher education and an internationally recognised researcher in areas related to higher education policy, equity and the student experience.

What is the contemporary student experience?

The students these days are more diverse in their backgrounds, they are more diverse in their expectations, and their lives in many ways are more complex than the lives of students back in the elite era of 30 or 40 years ago.

In a mass or universal system more students are going on to university who probably have quite marginal levels of preparedness for studies in higher education, so that's one area of difference. The other area of difference is that students have more study options available to them, so they have more choice in curriculum, more choice in study modes – which generally is believed to be a good thing, but choice brings complexity too.

So your average university student is juggling a complex range of study options, quite likely large volumes of work outside of their study and through all of that is also wondering about their future and the value proposition of doing higher education. That mix of factors, complexity of study life and the options available for students, volume of paid work and if you like some doubt about the value proposition for some students at least – is one of the factors in student attrition in first year, which is a significant issue in many Australian universities.

What can universities do to support student mental wellbeing?

I think there is more awareness in senior management of student mental health and student wellbeing, I don't think it's fully on the radar yet. I think it's a concept that's still maturing in terms of university policy and practice.

I think the big step forward for universities and for university communities is for student mental health and wellbeing not to be a kind of hidden issue, that it's something that we can openly talk about, it's something that we can see in signage around campus, for example, that students who face issues in this area do not feel shy or embarrassed about seeking assistance.

Professor Richard James
Director, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic)
Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne