



ENHANCING STUDENT MENTAL WELLBEING:

A Handbook for Academic Educators



**Chi Baik, Wendy Larcombe, Abi Brooker, Johanna Wyn,
Lee Allen, Matthew Brett, Rachael Field, Richard James**

unistudentwellbeing.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

The growing prevalence and severity of mental health difficulties across student populations in higher education is an issue of significant concern for universities. 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 behaviours. 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.

This handbook offers research-based guidance for academic teachers and leaders – as the drivers of innovation in university teaching and learning – 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 by fostering teaching and learning practices that support student mental wellbeing, this handbook aims to assist academic educators to promote mental health through the curriculum, not only within or alongside it.

The five chapters of this handbook present research findings and expert advice addressing the following questions:

- 1 Mental wellbeing** – Why are so many students experiencing poor mental health? Do students' high levels of psychological distress have anything to do with university education? What is the role of universities in supporting student mental health and wellbeing?
- 2 Curriculum design** – How does academic curriculum affect student mental health? Can curriculum be intentionally designed to better support student wellbeing? If so, how?

3 Teaching strategies – How can academic educators create learning environments that support student wellbeing? What can research supervisors do to better support the wellbeing of PhD candidates?

4 Difficult conversations – What is helpful to say to a student who is distressed or discloses personal trauma or abuse? What is and isn't your role?

5 Your wellbeing – How are you managing your own wellbeing?

The objectives of this handbook are to increase academics' confidence to interact and engage with students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties, as well as assist academic teachers in their roles as curriculum designers and teachers of diverse students. We argue that the understanding and strategies academic teachers develop will benefit all students, not only those at risk of experiencing mental health difficulties.

This handbook is part of a larger project, *Enhancing Student Wellbeing*, that aims to promote sector-wide conversations, a whole-of-institution approach and pedagogical innovations that enhance mental health and wellbeing, enabling all students to realise their academic potential.

The project outcomes include online professional development modules for educators (on which this handbook is based), a whole-of-institution Framework for Promoting Student Health and Wellbeing, and links to mental health resources and information are available in an interactive online format at <http://www.unistudentwellbeing.edu.au>

1 STUDENT WELLBEING

Chapter one explores conditions in higher education that may be contributing to high levels of psychological distress among university students. It also introduces a theoretical understanding of factors that support or undermine student mental health in diverse learning environments.

This chapter will help answer the questions: Why are so many university students experiencing poor mental health? Do students' high levels of psychological distress have anything to do with university education?

1.1 MENTAL HEALTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Recent studies have identified high levels of psychological distress and other symptoms of mental health difficulties among university students in Australia. In combination, these studies suggest that young people attending university may be at increased risk of experiencing high levels of depressive, anxiety and stress symptoms, compared with other young people in the community. The studies certainly tell us that a substantial proportion of the students in any university class will be experiencing some mental health difficulties.

WHAT IS 'MENTAL HEALTH'?

Mental health is an integral element of a person's overall state of health. "*Mental health*" is an umbrella term encompassing 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. A positive state of mental health – **mental wellbeing**, thriving or flourishing – requires more than the absence of mental health difficulties. Wellbeing is associated with experiences of personal growth, intrinsic motivation, positive relationships, autonomy and competence. A person's state of mental health fluctuates over time, in response to many factors including physical health, life events and environmental conditions that increase protective or risk factors.

Protective factors can promote positive mental health and wellbeing, whereas risk factors can exacerbate mental health difficulties (especially in the absence of protective factors).

It can be quite isolating, feeling sickly-anxious and depressed, and one can often feel like you're the only one having problems.

(Arts student)

In tertiary educational contexts risk factors (or psychological stressors) may include academic under-preparedness, financial strain, social isolation, poor physical health and controlling parental expectations.

Protective factors (or psychological resources) include an integrated sense of self (authentic autonomy), strong connections with others who share your values (sense of belonging), secure and loving personal relationships (relatedness), and experiences of being effective and able to meet the academic demands of their course (competence).

Mental health difficulties are behaviours or symptoms which signal a person may be experiencing some mental ill-health in response to psychological stressors, or lack of psychological resources. All people may experience mental health difficulties from time to time, independent of any diagnosis of mental illness, due to psychological distress or other risk factors.

In educational contexts, these recognisable mental health difficulties may include a student: acting in inappropriate or disruptive ways; exhibiting aggression and disrespect; appearing confused and lethargic, unable to concentrate or participate in class; bursting into tears, being hyper-sensitive or appearing to over-react; appearing withdrawn, avoiding eye contact or being unable to speak.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT:

Are university students psychologically distressed?

There is now a strong and expanding evidence base indicating that mental health difficulties are prevalent in university student populations across Australia, the UK and USA.

- University students are a 'high risk' population for mental health difficulties given that the prevalence of mental disorders is highest in the 16-24 year old age group. However, empirical studies suggest that young people undertaking university study may be experiencing higher levels of psychological distress than their age-matched peers in the general community (APS, 2014; Stallman, 2010).
- 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).
- International and domestic students report similar levels of psychological distress (Schofield et al, 2016).
- While academic field of study accounts for some variation in students' distress levels, high levels of distress have been recorded for students in diverse academic programs including Science, Engineering, Veterinary Medicine, Law and the Bachelor of Arts (Larcombe et al., 2015).

MENTAL HEALTH AND STUDENT LEARNING

Good mental health is essential for university students to achieve their academic potential. Mental health difficulties can impair students' learning, impacting on their attention, cognition, problem-solving, social interactions and the capacity to work constructively with others or to engage effectively with learning activities. Positive mental health (or wellbeing) on the other hand, means students will have the resilience, motivation and persistence needed to engage effectively in complex learning tasks, manage stressors, respond positively to challenges and make the most of the opportunities available.

Not all university students experience psychological distress or mental health difficulties. Some are positively thriving. This variance reflects differences in individuals' circumstances, resources and environmental settings.

Mental health depends on the balance of psychological stressors and psychological resources in a person's environment, and how the person interacts with those stressors and resources.

- Some, but not all, university students experience a range of stressors that impact learning, such as academic under-preparedness, financial strain, or social isolation.
- Some, but not all, university students enjoy strong psychological resources that support effective learning, such as an integrated sense of self (authentic autonomy), strong connections with others who share your values (providing a sense of belonging), and secure and loving personal relationships (relatedness).

The university environment plays a significant role in supporting or undermining student wellbeing. The best possible personal habits will not secure mental wellbeing if a person's environment does not supply the appropriate psychological 'nutriments'. Social and institutional environments may magnify or mitigate the stressors, or nurture or deplete an individual's psychological resources.

The focus of this handbook is on these environmental settings, and how academic educators can foster student wellbeing by developing supportive environments for students to learn and connect.

The best possible personal habits will not secure mental wellbeing if a person's environment does not supply the appropriate psychological 'nutriments'.

'Looking at the university student cohort some of the factors that might contribute to negative mental health could be a sense of being more isolated within the cohort or maybe within their personal life; the workload has been associated with increased poorer mental health outcomes; the financial stresses of university life seem to have raised concerns; as well as the sense of the student not belonging or feeling valued or having some meaning within the institution...'

Dr Lee Allen, Psychiatrist and university educator

SUMMARY:

- Students are at risk of experiencing mental health difficulties when psychological stressors become too great, or psychological resources are lacking.
- The university environment can support or undermine student mental wellbeing by magnifying or mitigating stressors and psychological resources associated with mental wellbeing.

1.2 STUDENT LIFE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This century has brought more opportunities than ever before to participate in higher education. Students have more choice in terms of courses and modes of participation. While it may seem that there is no better time to be a university student, in many ways, student life is more complex and challenging than in past decades. This increases the psychological stressors that students experience.

Universities are now much larger and students far more diverse than in the past. Compared to 30 or 40 years ago when a relatively small number of young people went to university, today over 1.2 million people are enrolled in higher education in Australia. This means that the student body and student life today are different in several important ways compared with past generations:

- There are more mature age, international, regional, distance, and ‘first-in-family’ students undertaking university study
- Contemporary students are more varied in their motivations, academic abilities and preparedness for university study
- Student expectations of universities and their goals in undertaking university study are more varied
- Contemporary university students are organising their study around paid work, volunteering or sporting commitments, and an active social life
- Many students are also juggling family care responsibilities and financial or community obligations.

While increased participation and diversity in higher education is a positive development, for some students being part of a complex ‘mass’ education system is de-personalising and isolating. For students entering university with lower levels of academic readiness or with multiple competing commitments, the stressors associated with the academic demands of a course can feel overwhelming. Many students are spending less time on campus than in past decades, and increases in enrolments and class-sizes mean that some students complete courses without making any friends among their university cohort (Baik et al., 2015; UES, 2015).



Higher education participation has never been as expensive for students as it is today. For many students, the direct and indirect costs of university study are a major source of stress (Bexley et al., 2013; UES 2015).

Added to this is growing uncertainty about the value of a university degree in terms of employment and income-generating outcomes. On its own, earning a degree is no longer enough to secure rewarding employment (Graduate Careers Australia, 2014). As a result many university students feel they need to achieve high grades while also engaging in a range of extra-curricular and voluntary activities to build their resumes and enhance their 'employability'. The stress of juggling multiple commitments and financial pressures, with no clear idea where university study leads to, are causes of concern for many contemporary students (UES, 2015).

The student experience is quite different from what it used to be... So many people are out working, campus life is not as easy or as inclusive as it may once have been and so students aren't finding that they can meet people as easily as they would have liked to, because people are rushing off to do their job.

Prof. Johanna Wyn, Director of The Youth Research Centre, Melbourne

SUMMARY:

- The student body and student life have changed significantly over the past few decades. 'Mass' participation and increased diversity have affected the ability of many students to participate meaningfully in university life, taking into account the different levels of academic preparedness, multiple competing demands, and stressors associated with study that affect students.
- The costs and value of higher education are changing. Higher education participation has never been more expensive, and there is now growing uncertainty about the value of a university degree in terms of employment and income-generating outcomes.

I don't know what I'm really meant to be doing, I do my work, go to lectures, go to my tutes but I can't see where any of it leads or if I should be going there.

(Arts student)

Autonomous motivations are blunted and our wellbeing is undermined when we feel pressured to act or feel that we are being controlled by others.

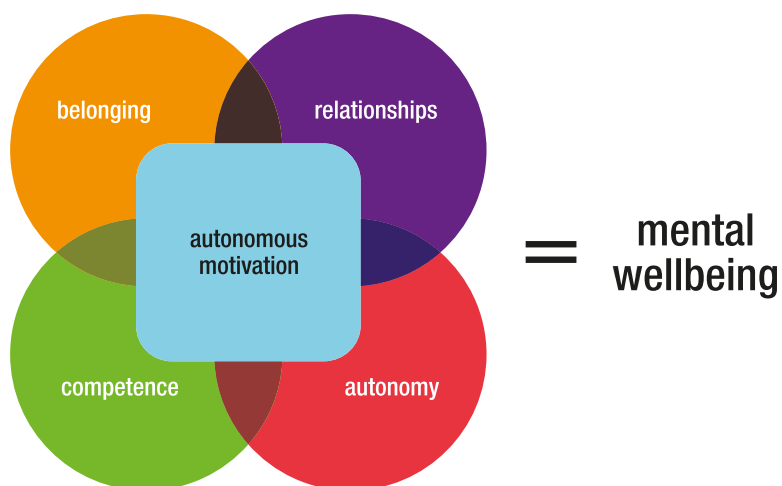
Autonomous motivation is also undermined when we feel that we are not capable of doing what we would like to do, or that our actions do not have any effect.

1.3 WELLBEING ESSENTIALS

The stressors inherent in a mass higher education system and an increasingly uncertain and challenging employment market cannot be eliminated, only mitigated and managed. To this end, all students can benefit from learning and teaching environments intentionally designed to support psychological wellbeing.

Empirical research consistently identifies that student mental wellbeing and academic achievement are both strengthened by learning environments that actively foster 5 wellbeing essentials:

- **Autonomous motivation** – we are autonomously motivated when we do things because we find the activities intrinsically interesting or satisfying, or when we believe our actions will facilitate valued goals
- **Belonging** – we experience belonging when we feel that we are accepted and valued by others within social groups and organisations
- **Relationships** – we experience positive relationships when we trust, rely on and care for others and experience others trusting, relying on or caring for us
- **Autonomy** – we experience autonomy when our actions, tasks and goals are self-chosen and self-concordant (authentic), rather than imposed or controlled by others
- **Competence** – we experience competence when we are able to manage the interactions, tasks and challenges that we face



Experiences of belonging (B), positive relationships (R), autonomy (A) and competence (C) are essential to psychological wellbeing; they provide the psychological 'nutriments' or 'resources' that sustain and enhance autonomous motivation (M) and the engagement, persistence and effort that flow from it.

Self-Determination Theory posits that these fundamental psychological nutrients are available to and integrated by individuals when their actions are autonomously motivated (M), as illustrated in the figure above. This makes Autonomous Motivation a key driver of mental wellbeing, or the wellspring of psychological resources (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Autonomous motivations are blunted and our wellbeing is undermined when we feel pressured to act or feel that we are being controlled by others. While external pressures can be energizing, acting in order to please or impress others, or to avoid disappointing them (controlled motivation), is not psychologically nurturing because it does not facilitate a sense of 'being ourselves' and acting in accordance with our true values and interests.

Autonomous motivation is also undermined when we feel that we are not capable of doing what we would like to do, or that our actions do not have any effect. Such beliefs can lead to 'amotivation' – or a lack of motivation to act intentionally and purposefully. This is another negative psychological state, as amotivated people simply 'go through the motions' without a sense of purpose or meaning.

Autonomous motivation is sustained by and reliant on regular experiences of relatedness, autonomy and competence (Vansteenkiste, Lens and Deci 2006; Deci and Ryan, 2000).

In educational contexts, autonomous or positive motivation is associated with: increased effort and persistence, increased enjoyment and interest, proactive responses to mistakes and disappointments, and higher academic achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci, 2006).

Controlled or negative motivations are associated with: resentment and compliance rather than interest and enthusiasm, strategic and instrumental (rather than mastery) learning approaches, defensive (rather than proactive) coping in response to mistakes and disappointments, and poorer academic performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci, 2006).

Not all university students may be intrinsically interested in the courses they are taking, especially because parental pressure, societal expectations, reduced employment options and other circumstances play an increasingly large role in students' decisions to attend university. However, initial reasons for enrolling in a course are only part of the picture. Students' motivations for university study are fluid and highly responsive to experiences in the educational environment. Student mental wellbeing will be supported when teaching and learning practices actively engage students' intrinsic interests and communicate the importance and value of the knowledge and skills being developed.

I feel like I know no one here and at times I can feel quite isolated from other students. I feel like I don't have a solid way of meeting and engaging with students outside of course work.

(Science student)

Autonomous motivation is sustained by and reliant on regular experiences of relatedness, autonomy and competence.

Initial reasons for enrolling in a course are only part of the picture. Students' motivations for university study are fluid and highly responsive to experiences in the educational environment.

SUMMARY:

- Autonomous motivation is enhanced by experiences of belonging, positive relationships, autonomy and competence – the five ‘wellbeing essentials’.
- We are autonomously motivated when we do things because we find the activities intrinsically interesting or satisfying, or when we believe our actions will facilitate valued goals.
- Teachers and learning environments have the ability to enhance feelings of belonging, positive relationships, autonomy and competence, and thus make students more autonomously motivated.
- Students who are autonomously motivated are more likely to perform better academically than those whose motivations are controlled.

Academic curriculum structures and gives coherence to student life. Increasingly, the curriculum is the one consistent element of the student experience.

I had a hard time adjusting in first semester of first year because I felt like a ‘number’ and that the university didn’t really care about me.

(Science student)

1.4 FOSTERING STUDENT WELLBEING: THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

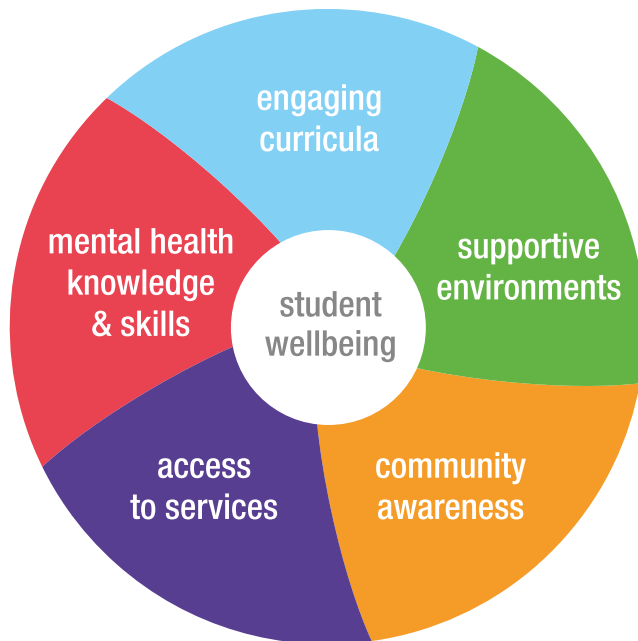
Student mental wellbeing in higher education will be supported by academic educators:

- *Adopting* practices and creating learning environments that increase the opportunities for students to pursue their interests and goals, and to experience belonging, relationships, autonomy and competence AND
- *Redesigning* practices and conditions that control or demotivate students, direct learning to extrinsic rather than intrinsic goals, undermine a sense of belonging, or thwart experiences of close relationships, autonomy and competence.

Redesigning teaching practices and learning environments is not an easy or simple task – especially given the constraints and challenges that university educators currently face. In a range of ways, the conditions that structure contemporary higher education (outlined in 1.2) such as under-funding, increasing student numbers and ‘mass’ delivery may actively make it more difficult for students to maintain autonomous motivation, and to experience belonging, relationships, autonomy and competence.

Those same conditions – combined with increasing workloads, insecurity and ‘casualisation’ in academic employment – may also undermine the mental wellbeing of academic staff. In this context, it may seem unreasonable to ask university educators to consider adopting strategies to support and enhance student mental wellbeing.

Without doubt, the task of fostering student wellbeing in higher education will benefit from a ‘whole-of-university’, if not sector-wide, approach (see our Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities at unistudentwellbeing.edu.au). Fostering student mental wellbeing will also benefit from collaborative partnerships between student groups, professional staff, university administrators and mental health experts and service providers.



Academics have a critical role to play in fostering student mental wellbeing. This is because the academic curriculum structures and gives coherence to student life. Increasingly, the curriculum is the one consistent element of the student experience. Academic educators are the ones who design and deliver that curriculum. There is thus great potential for academic teachers to foster student mental wellbeing through teaching innovation and the intentional design of learning environments that are psychologically ‘resource-rich’ for students.

Happily, supporting student wellbeing does not require academics to be or become psychologists, mental health experts or counsellors. It is not the job of university educators to make students happy or to help students resolve their mental health difficulties.

However, as educators, it is our job to facilitate student learning. This means it is in our interests to adopt curriculum, teaching and

I sit there in class and feel lost, especially compared to other students who seem to know all the content, and I can't help but feel incompetent, and as much as I try I can't help but compare myself to them and feel like I'm so far behind them.

(Veterinary Medicine Student)

It is not the job of university educators to make students happy or to help students resolve their mental health difficulties.

Curriculum design and teaching practices influence student mental wellbeing (positively and negatively).

assessment approaches – informed by psychological principles and research – that may mitigate psychological stressors in the educational environment. This is because good mental health is essential for effective learning, and because curriculum design and teaching practices influence student mental wellbeing (positively and negatively). Adopting teaching and learning approaches that actively support student mental health will enhance the wellbeing and educational experiences of all students, not just those at risk of experiencing mental health difficulties during their time at university.

SUMMARY:

- There are many challenges for academics to redesign teaching practices and learning environments to support mental wellbeing, however, academics are ideally placed to do so, as all students interact with curriculum.
- Academics can enhance student learning and mental wellbeing by employing techniques to foster students' autonomous motivation, promote inclusion and belonging, encourage positive relationships, enable autonomy and scaffold competence.



Principles for enhancing student mental wellbeing through learning and teaching

A teaching and learning environment designed to support student mental wellbeing aims to:



Foster students' autonomous **MOTIVATION**, and sense of meaning and purpose

- Highlight the social value of discipline practitioners' knowledge and skills
- Support students to develop learning goals in line with their intrinsic values and emerging interests and capabilities
- Demonstrate that you value students' learning and understand their perspectives



Promote inclusion and **BELONGING**

- Know your students' diverse needs and interests
- Value diversity and practice social inclusion
- Induct students into your discipline's values and professional standards



Promote inclusion and **RELATIONSHIPS**

- Facilitate student-faculty and peer social interactions
- Foster collaborative (not competitive) learning
- Express interest in and care and concern for others



Enable **AUTONOMY**

- Justify required tasks and knowledge, and teaching and assessment methods
- Within the constraints of the curriculum, give students choice and ensure variety in learning activities and assessment tasks
- Support students to make informed choices aligned with their interests, values or goals



Scaffold **COMPETENCE**

- Use informational (rather than controlling) language
- Ensure an appropriate level of challenge and support at each program level
- Provide meaningful feedback on student learning and performance



2 CURRICULUM DESIGN

This chapter is relevant to academic educators with responsibilities for curriculum design. It explores the ways that decisions in curriculum design might increase or mitigate student anxiety and distress. It also offers good practice strategies to enhance student wellbeing.

This chapter will answer the questions: How does academic curriculum affect student mental health? Can curriculum be intentionally designed to better support student wellbeing?

2.1 HOW CURRICULUM DESIGN AFFECTS STUDENT WELLBEING

Student wellbeing will be supported or undermined by the curriculum depending on the extent to which it fosters students' autonomous motivation, and creates opportunities for students to experience competence, autonomy, relationships and belonging. If curriculum is not designed to support these wellbeing essentials, it may inadvertently undermine students' psychological resources, contributing to or exacerbating mental health difficulties.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'CURRICULUM'?

In this project, curriculum is defined to include what is taught (and assessed) as well as how it is taught (and assessed). Curriculum is thus a product and a process, with the design goal of facilitating and enriching student learning. Designing curriculum involves asking: to best achieve the desired learning outcomes, 'what should we teach?' and 'how should we teach?' (Barnett, 2009). As McInnis (2001), puts it:

'The curriculum is the glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together and enables the knowledge to be used effectively by the student.' (p.11)

There are three elements to an academic curriculum: formal learning, informal learning and the 'hidden' curriculum. Formal learning experiences are delivered through course materials, lectures, tutorials, seminars, assessment tasks, work placements and so on. Complementary informal learning experiences occur through co-curricular student activities, such as volunteering, mentoring programs, sporting and social events. These are explicit curriculum elements.

There is also the ‘hidden curriculum’ – messages communicated indirectly through the formal curriculum about desired values, beliefs, behaviours and ways of understanding. These implicit messages, often culturally specific, can powerfully shape students’ experiences of university education and their engagement with the formal curriculum (Margolis, 2001).

This handbook addresses design of the formal curriculum, both at a macro whole-of-program or degree level and at the individual unit or subject level. In considering ways to enhance student mental wellbeing, it also attends to the messages delivered through the informal curriculum.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT:

Designing curriculum to support student mental wellbeing

Student mental wellbeing is a condition (or pre-requisite) for effective learning (Seligman, 2012). Emerging evidence confirms that student wellbeing can be cultivated and supported through intentional curriculum design (Slavin, Schindler & Chibnall, 2014; Tang & Ferguson, 2014).

Key strategies employed to successfully promote student wellbeing in medical (e.g. Slavin et. al., 2014) and legal education (e.g. Tang & Ferguson) involve identifying and reducing unnecessary stressors in the curriculum and recognising students’ psychological needs. They 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 perform.

For university educators, the possibility of improving student learning outcomes as well as mental health is a major incentive to consider the psychological impacts of curriculum design and, where possible, ensure that curriculum choices support rather than undermine student wellbeing.

WHY IS THE CURRICULUM SO IMPORTANT TO STUDENT MENTAL WELLBEING?

The curriculum is central to students' experience of university. It is a university's primary means of influencing what and how students learn, and it helps shape their attitudes, behaviours and understanding of the world.

Moreover, all students are engaged with the formal curriculum (in varying degrees) making it the best vehicle for ensuring that all students have opportunities to experience competence, autonomy, relationships and belonging. If the curriculum is not designed to create such opportunities and to foster students' autonomous motivation, it will inadvertently undermine students' psychological resources.

For university educators, the possibility of improving student learning outcomes as well as mental health is a major incentive to consider the psychological impacts of curriculum design and, where possible, ensure that curriculum choices support rather than undermine student wellbeing.



CURRICULUM DESIGN MAY INADVERTENTLY UNDERMINE STUDENT MENTAL WELLBEING



Autonomous **MOTIVATION** is undermined when students feel pressured or controlled, or feel that their interests and perspectives are not acknowledged. Factors such as curriculum crowding, lack of structure and coherence in the sequencing of topics and tasks, and assuming knowledge that has not been taught will create such feelings. Students will also lack motivation if they are unable to internalise the value and importance of knowledge and tasks that they do not find inherently meaningful.



A sense of **BELONGING** – in the classroom, the course and the academic field – will be undermined by subject curricula if topics and tasks make incorrect assumptions about students' capacities, prior knowledge, interests or experiences. Curricula may also exclude by making (direct or indirect) discriminatory assumptions about individuals and social groups. In either case, a student may feel misrecognised and excluded, possibly rejected and offended. Such assumptions can be avoided by finding out as much as you can about your students, their circumstances and their prior learning when planning your curriculum. Also ensure that all curriculum materials use inclusive language and avoid social and cultural stereotypes.



Positive **RELATIONSHIPS** are more likely to form when the curriculum is designed to facilitate personal interactions between students and between students and faculty. Given high student numbers in most university courses, such interactions may no longer occur 'naturally', leaving students feeling that the university is impersonal and that they are anonymous. Scheduling time in the curriculum for 'ice-breakers' and 'getting-to-know you' activities, and in-class interactive activities (such as buzz groups, think-pair-share) can help facilitate positive interpersonal experiences. Ensuring that all students have some 'small group' experiences, or an opportunity to be individually supervised, will also help to foster meaningful interactions and a sense of relatedness. Such experiences enhance a student's sense of belonging, as well as experiences of autonomy and competence. Close relationships with other students or an academic will also sustain a student who feels out of place or that they are not a natural 'fit' within their course or institution.



Experiences of **AUTONOMY** (being in the driver's seat) will be denied or undermined if students do not understand why certain knowledge and tasks are required of them, or they feel that what they have to do and how they have to do it is overly-prescribed. Providing rationales for curriculum choices and decisions, in terms that demonstrate understanding of students' perspectives and concern for their interests and goals, will help students to endorse those choices and decisions, thereby supporting a sense of autonomy and agency. Offering meaningful choices is also valuable – provided that choices are not too complex and genuinely enable students to pursue different interests and preferences.



Experiences of **COMPETENCE** will be undermined if the curriculum does not offer optimal challenge, if 'threshold' concepts and skills are not established early, or if students do not receive meaningful and informative feedback on their progress. Students will also feel ineffective or incompetent if the workload is not manageable; if effort is wasted because the 'goal posts' shift or instructions and goals are unclear; or if feedback identifies errors or weaknesses without explaining how these can be addressed. A carefully planned curriculum with clear learning goals, sequenced learning activities, and assessment tasks that inform both learning and subsequent teaching are the basis of student competence.

2.2 START HERE: CURRICULUM DESIGN FOUNDATIONS

A well-designed curriculum provides the foundations for student mental wellbeing.

Designing an academic curriculum involves deciding what to teach (and assess) and how best to teach (and assess) your students. In a well-structured curriculum, these core curriculum decisions are made to ensure:

- There is 'alignment' between the curriculum elements – within and across year levels
- Curriculum materials and learning experiences are optimally organised and sequenced
- Planned learning activities promote deep learning and student engagement
- Planned assessment encourages desired behaviours and informs learning.

When curriculum elements are aligned, learning is optimally sequenced, and student engagement and progress are fostered, students have a sound foundation for both learning and mental wellbeing.

HOW MIGHT THE ELEMENTS OF GOOD CURRICULUM DESIGN SUPPORT STUDENT MENTAL WELLBEING?

A Close alignment of curriculum elements

'Alignment' of curriculum elements – so that they become a system or integrated whole – has become a touchstone of good curriculum design in recent years. Most university curricula comprise several common components: learning objectives, syllabus, teaching methods, learning activities and assessment. How these components are designed and how they fit together (or not) affects how students learn and their motivation for learning.

At the degree or program level, a well-designed curriculum consists of a series of individual subjects that are horizontally and vertically well-aligned. Horizontal alignment means that subjects complement and reinforce other subjects taught in the same year of a program, and vertical alignment refers to clear connections 'downward' to subjects or educational experiences in earlier years, and 'upward' to subjects that will be undertaken in subsequent years (Angelo, 2012, p.97).

Good curriculum design also consists of well-aligned elements within the curriculum – that is, a close linkage of explicit learning objectives (or intended learning outcomes), with teaching and learning activities and assessment. Biggs' 'Constructive Alignment'

More detailed information about constructive alignment is downloadable as a PDF here: www.unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/curriculum-design/start-here.

(2003) provides a useful framework for designing subject curriculum based on the principle of curriculum alignment and a constructivist theory of learning. In a nutshell, this theory posits that students learn best by actively constructing their own learning and building on their existing knowledge.

Developing and communicating clear and explicit learning outcomes helps students set goals for their learning which can enhance their motivation and engagement in the learning process. Engaging in learning activities and assessment tasks that are well-aligned to the learning outcomes helps students to feel autonomous because they understand that these activities contribute to their goals. Developing the knowledge and skills to achieve those goals in turn supports students' sense of competence.

B Purposeful organisation and sequencing of content

In a well-designed curriculum, content and materials will be organised and ordered in an educationally justifiable way – that is, in a way most conducive to student learning. This commonly involves designing tasks that are within students' current capabilities, and arranging materials so that the topics addressed generate interest and confidence in students. Developing students' confidence in their ability to learn is essential for persistence, engagement and success.

Having highly structured initial experiences of achievement and growth, especially in first year, can help build student confidence, and promote motivation and a sense of purpose. These early structured experiences also help make subsequent, more complex and less-structured learning experiences more fruitful because students are more likely to persist and invest effort when they have a strong sense of self-efficacy (Ramsden, 2003).

Increasingly, educators are paying attention to designing curriculum so that students develop a strong understanding of 'threshold concepts' – the significant concepts in a subject that are reflective of and essential to the ways of thinking in a discipline (Meyer & Land, 2003). Organising content and materials to help build and consolidate students' grasp of 'threshold' concepts and skills provides students with a solid foundation for complex learning and 'mastery' of the subject.

When topics and materials are addressed to students' interests, goals and capabilities, and are organised in a way to build and consolidate students' understanding and skills in the subject, students develop confidence in their ability to learn effectively, which in turn motivates them to tackle more complex tasks and challenges. These experiences of competence help maintain positive task persistence and engagement.

More detailed information about threshold concepts is downloadable as a PDF here: www.unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/curriculum-design/start-here.

C A variety of engaging learning activities

Good curriculum design includes a variety of learning activities that engage students in deep (rather than ‘surface’) learning.

Deep learning is fostered by activities that:

- Encourage students to build on prior learning – i.e. what they already know
- Provide authentic, ‘real-world’ learning experiences
- Enable students to make meaning of their experiences and understand their world
- Are relevant to students’ goals, interests and values
- Enable students to apply knowledge and practice/rehearse skills
- Promote peer interaction and social engagement
- Help students spend their independent study time (outside of class) productively
- Provide opportunities for students to self-monitor and evaluate their learning.

The quality of feedback students receive has a powerful effect on their confidence and motivation to learn and persist when they face challenges.

Fostering student engagement by offering a variety of learning activities can support the five mental health essentials. When activities are designed to build on prior learning and give opportunities for students to practise skills and receive feedback, students’ experiences of competence are supported. When activities encourage regular peer interaction and collaborative learning, this promotes positive relationships among students and may help them to feel a greater sense of belonging to the social group. If activities are authentic and relevant to students’ goals, interests or values, students are more likely to be autonomously motivated to learn. Students’ sense of autonomy is also supported when they are enabled to use their strengths and preferred modes of learning, and variety in learning activities ensures this opportunity for all students.

D A focus on assessment for learning

Focusing on assessment for learning means designing assessment to provide numerous opportunities for students to receive informative feedback and improve learning. A key goal of assessment for learning is to promote the development of learner self-regulation – that is, students’ understanding of what they need to do to improve their work which in turn enhances students’ responsibility for, and control over, their own learning (Nicols, 2007).

Assessment has a powerful influence on students’ learning. For many students it defines the curriculum and indicates the kind of

intellectual work that is valued (Maclellan, 2004). Assessment has multiple (sometimes conflicting) purposes, but in general, the aim of university assessment is to:

- guide and encourage effective approaches to learning
- validly and reliably measure expected learning outcomes
- define and protect academic standards (McInnis et al., 2003).

Well-designed assessment will provide a variety of options for students to demonstrate their learning across the subject

The quality of feedback students receive has a powerful effect on their confidence and motivation to learn and persist when they face challenges. While constructive, informative feedback that carefully explains how the work can be improved and why the changes are important can foster students' sense of competence and motivation, receiving no feedback, uninformative feedback ('good work', 'incorrect', 'not what the question asked for') or overly negative feedback ('next time, read the textbook before writing your assignment', 'this is unintelligible') can undermine student motivation.

In addition, when assessment tasks build students' understanding of what the assessor wants and why, this encourages the development of learner self-regulation and, hence, a sense of autonomy. Students' sense of autonomy is also fostered when assessment incorporates self-review or enables students to make meaningful choices in how they approach tasks.



2.3 NEXT STEPS: INCORPORATING WELLBEING ESSENTIALS

While the basic principles of good curriculum design provide a sound foundation for student wellbeing (as well as learning), you can enhance student mental wellbeing through curriculum design by asking:

- How will the curriculum be experienced by my (diverse) students?
- Will the curriculum foster or thwart experiences of the five wellbeing essentials? (See 1.3 Wellbeing essentials)

Reviewing your curriculum with these questions in mind will enable you to identify which of the wellbeing essentials needs more support. Follow the boxed text below for a more in depth analysis of your curriculum. You can then plan to address the identified area/s.

CONSIDERATIONS IN DESIGNING CURRICULUM TO BETTER SUPPORT STUDENT MENTAL WELLBEING

Supporting student wellbeing requires an iterative and reflective approach to curriculum design in which strategies and approaches are tried, evaluated, reviewed and revised in light of information about students' experiences and learning outcomes. The motivations of educators are critical, as are the relationships developed with students. Isolated measures may not be effective and all measures must be adapted to the local context.

While there are some curricular strategies and design elements that you can adopt to support student wellbeing on the basis that others have found them to be effective, careful thought will need to be given to the context in which the strategy is to be implemented:

- What are the issues and factors affecting your students?
- What resources and institutional support do you have?
- Is there a network of colleagues in your discipline or an institutional community of practice that can support you?
- How can you collect evidence about your students' experience of the curriculum and overall wellbeing?

PLANNING A CURRICULUM INNOVATION

Key to the success of any curriculum innovation is a clear understanding by the curriculum designers and teachers of why change is needed and what changes are needed. Planning in advance how you will evaluate the effects of the changes – on students and staff – is also vital.

Keep in mind, however, that the effects of subject/unit changes may be difficult to assess. In our view, there is value in doing what you can to support student wellbeing in curriculum design, even if its effects cannot be measured by the instruments and metrics currently available to us.

CURRICULUM REVIEW CHECKLIST

Planning

- How will you document the problems or issues that teachers have observed or experienced and that you would like to address through a curriculum review? (this will also help you assess the effectiveness of your changes)
- How will you reach agreement among those responsible for course/unit delivery on the need for change? (this will also help avoid resistance and undermining behavior)
- How will you, in collaboration with discipline experts and peers, determine where change is needed? For example, by asking:
 - How well does the current curriculum align, sequence learning, engage learners, assess for learning (see 2.2)?
 - How well does the current curriculum support students' mental wellbeing by creating opportunities for students to experience autonomous motivation, belonging, relationships, autonomy and competence (see 1.3 and 2.1)?
- How will you, in collaboration with discipline experts and peers, determine what change is needed in the identified area/s?
- How will you assess the feasibility of the identified strategies in your local context: considering resourcing, timelines and contingencies?

Implementing

- How will you (and the teaching team) document the changes made?
- How will you assess the extent to which the planned changes are implemented?
- How will the changes be explained to students?
- How will transition problems and issues be identified and managed?

Evaluating

How will the learning outcomes of the new curriculum be evaluated – what measures are available?

- How will the curriculum's impact on student wellbeing be assessed?
- How will the curriculum's demands on staff be assessed?
- How will you know whether the changes achieved your goals?

2.4 TROUBLESHOOTING: CURRICULUM DESIGN FAQs

In this section we discuss seven common questions about designing curriculum with student mental wellbeing in mind.

Q Does concern for student mental wellbeing require curriculum designers to exclude materials, topics and perspectives that may be distressing for some students?

A No. Whether students' psychological wellbeing - M-BRAC - is supported or undermined by working with such materials and topics will depend on factors such as:

- How they are introduced to students
- Whether students are equipped cognitively and emotionally to engage with the materials/topics
- How students who experience distress are supported
- Whether the materials or topics are perceived by students as relevant and important to the required learning.

In short, it is how and when potentially distressing materials and topics are introduced to students that matters. That said, it is important that you recognise which materials and which topics may be psychologically distressing for some students (even if they are not to you); otherwise, students may feel that their reactions are inappropriate, or that teachers are uncaring.

Q 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?

A This is a complex question. For various reasons outside many curriculum designers' control - e.g. employers' requirements, departmental assessment policies – it is often not possible to eliminate high stakes assessment and normative grading. However, while it may be difficult to eliminate high stakes assessment, curriculum designers can do quite a lot to reduce psychological stress and help students experience a greater sense of competence by:

- Ensuring that guidelines and criteria for assessment are made explicit and that students understand them
- Helping students understand the standard required for a good result in the subject, perhaps by working through some examples together
- Giving students numerous opportunities to rehearse and practice the skills necessary to complete the assessment task
- Providing numerous opportunities for students to receive formative feedback on their learning during the subject
- Helping students develop metacognitive and self-regulation skills.

Q 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?

A It depends. Group work can only provide opportunities to experience positive relationships if it is well designed to fit students' capacities and learning goals, and genuinely requires group interaction and collaboration. If the task is designed poorly or if students have not been supported to develop group process skills (e.g. interpersonal, organisational, problem solving and managerial skills), assigned group work may be a source of disagreements, tensions and problems that the students are not capable of resolving independently. This will undermine students' feelings of competence and positive relationships with others.

Q Is student mental wellbeing supported by offering lots of choices for assignment topics or letting students develop their own topics?

A It depends. Choice in assignment topics will be welcome if it permits students to explore their interests or approach the task in a preferred way – for example, when students are given the choice to submit an expository, creative or persuasive response to a topic. However, the choices must be meaningful and options must be equally supported and of comparable difficulty. Otherwise, students may not be able to distinguish between the options, or those who choose one option may be disadvantaged. It will be important to consider your students' level of academic preparation and the level of support you can provide before permitting students to develop their own topics for assessment tasks.

Q Student mental wellbeing would improve if academic standards were lower and it was easier for students to pass. True or false?

A False. Making course content and pass requirements 'easier' may in fact undermine students' motivation because the coursework no longer offers students optimal academic challenge. Reducing the academic demands of a course may also leave students feeling under-prepared for internships and work-placements. Student mental wellbeing is better supported by strategies such as: providing appropriate academic skills training and support for those who need it; ensuring that threshold concepts and skills are acquired early and consolidated throughout the course; and ensuring that curriculum crowding is not preventing students from pursuing topics of interest in depth.

Q Is student mental wellbeing supported by assessing students regularly using low-value tasks?

A Not necessarily. It depends on several factors and how these contribute to students' experience of competence and autonomy. These include:

- What the assessment tasks require of students - i.e. do the low value tasks reflect the effort it will take for students to complete regular assessment?
- How the assessment tasks are related to each other and to the subject learning outcomes - i.e. do they build on each other to align with and develop the core learning outcomes?
- What opportunities student have to receive feedback on their performance and use it to improve in future assessments.

Q Autonomous motivation is fostered by including work placements and internships in the curriculum. True or false?

A It depends. Work-integrated learning experiences such as internships or work placement can provide students with valuable authentic learning experiences and foster autonomous motivation by helping them see the practical relevance and value of their learning in the ‘real world’. To benefit from their work placement however, students need to be well-prepared and supported to face the potential issues and challenges that can arise in a professional work setting. Being ill-prepared to undertake a work placement or internships often leads to students feeling overwhelmed and this will undermine their feelings of competence and autonomous motivation.

2.5 REDESIGNING CURRICULUM: GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

This following pages offer six examples of academic educators who redesigned their curriculum to better support students’ mental wellbeing. In each case, innovations were 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.



1 LEGAL WORKSHOP, GRADUATE DIPLOMA OF LEGAL PRACTICE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY



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TEACHING CONTEXT

THE GDLP: The ANU Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice provides LLB and JD graduates with the qualification required to be admitted as a lawyer in Australia. The GDLP is delivered almost entirely online, and can be completed in 6 months.

STUDENTS: Between 500-900 students located around Australia and internationally undertake the GDLP in each of two yearly intakes (summer and winter). All students have already completed a 3-4 year LLB or JD qualification.

TEACHING TEAM: A team of six convenors at the ANU Legal Workshop design the learning resources and work with up to 150 practice mentors (who are all experienced legal practitioners) to deliver the program.

ISSUE: IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Legal professionals are known to experience high rates of psychological distress, with adverse health impacts including depression, anxiety and addiction. In response, there is growing interest in redesigning legal education to prepare well-rounded future lawyers who have the knowledge and skills to be competent, ethical and mentally-healthy practitioners.

AIM

Design a professional legal education program that would better support students to make the transition from academic study to professional practice by developing an authentic professional identity and establishing professional competencies that underpin development and wellbeing of the 'whole person'.

CURRICULUM ELEMENTS

The GDLP consists of a 5-day face-to-face workshop (taught in all capital cities and various regional centres) that introduces students to the essential skills for 'Becoming a Practitioner'. Students are then 'recruited' into virtual law firms where they work collaboratively online (in teams of 4) over 16 weeks to develop further expertise in core areas of legal practice – such as property, civil litigation and commercial law – and gain the real-world knowledge and attributes demanded by employers. This 'Professional Practice Core' (PPC) is complemented by and supports students to undertake at least 20 days of practical experience under the supervision of an experienced lawyer.

PROGRAM DESIGN STRATEGIES

The Legal Workshop team are actively trialling and evaluating approaches to curriculum development that support student wellbeing in an integrated and holistic sense – rather than providing 'add on' decontextualised modules on mental health that are unlikely to provide an adequate foundation for effective management of the uncertainties, unknowns and complexities involved in legal practice.

Key strategies that the ANU Legal Workshop team identify as supporting the wellbeing of GDLP students:

- **Foster development of professional identity through simulation of legal practice**

The development of law students into legal professionals is facilitated in the PPC through online simulation of a legal workplace and legal transactions that require students to 'act' in the role of a 'newly admitted lawyer'. Each 'virtual firm' of four students is assigned a Practice Mentor for the duration of the course and teams are trained and supported to work collaboratively. The simulated practice environment offers students a safe place to make mistakes and learn through trial, error, feedback and reflection.

- **Redesign assessment of and feedback on professional competencies**

Students' competencies and behaviours are assessed through satisfactory completion of a number of legal transactions to a professional standard (rather than through normatively graded self-contained

assignments). To graduate, students must refine their work-products, individually and in groups, until each piece meets a ‘competent’ standard. Practice mentors and other group members provide timely feedback to students on their work-product and the ways their work practices, behaviour and communications impact on others. There are also structured opportunities (in ‘practice management’) for students to reflect on individual learning and development and the team work process, including challenges and problem solving strategies. While Mentors ‘step in’ to counsel teams when there are conflicts or they fall behind in their work, student teams are expected and supported to negotiate work plans and timelines, keep one another informed of progress, and manage delays, setbacks and conflicts – all critical skills for newly admitted lawyers.

- **Intentionally develop students’ capacity to manage unforeseens, unknowns and uncertainties**

The active process of learning through performance of authentic transactions involving reflection, collaboration, and holistic or process learning – is a ‘messy learning process’ in which students must discern the nature of their tasks, locate the resources to assist them in resolving the task and consider that there may not be just ‘one’ answer to the task provided. In this way students learn to become comfortable with the fact that uncertainty is a constant feature of legal life. To emphasise this point, and in keeping with the simulation of legal practice conditions, some deadlines and milestones are set for work outputs, but students are also told that things will ‘come up’ through the course that need to be managed ‘on the fly’, such as new facts, a change in the client’s instructions, or a request from a senior partner to ‘please advise by tomorrow’.

- **Integrate the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) curriculum in the PPC**

Drawing on curriculum developed by Mary Gentile of Babson College (www.GivingVoiceToValues.org) for MBA students, the Legal Workshop team has

designed an integrated curriculum component to help students learn to not just recognise ethical conflicts that arise in the workplace, but to enable them to voice and act on their values when these conflicts arise. Through concrete examples and roleplay, GVV encourages self-knowledge and acting from one’s strengths. In so doing, it promotes wellbeing and preparedness for practice – on the working theory that if a practitioner can bring her/his ‘whole self’ to work then she/he will generally have a better sense of wellbeing and a more sustainable professional identity.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

The first iteration of the ‘whole person’ curriculum was introduced with the PPC in 2010. A survey is administered at the start of the PPC course to assist students to reflect on what they are bringing into the program and their wellbeing and goals. That survey is repeated at the end of the course and students can elect to submit their data for research and course improvement purposes. Survey data from more than 2,000 GDLP students:

- Enables evidence based strategic review and adaptation of the learning approaches employed in the GDLP in order to improve the student experience.
- Shows that, in stark contrast to the high levels of psychological distress experienced by Australian LLB and JD students, students undertaking the GDLP maintain levels of wellbeing similar to or better than their community peers. That is, student wellbeing does not decline over the course, despite the intensity of the program.
- Suggests that the focus on professionalism, self-management and values-congruent experiential learning in the GDLP may be insulating students against sources of distress.
- Shows that graduates have high levels of pathway thinking (being able to come up with ways to solve a problem) and agency thinking (being able to act on those problem solving pathways successfully).

2 UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL PROGRAM MONASH UNIVERSITY



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TEACHING CONTEXT

MED1011 is the first unit (first semester, first year) of the five-year undergraduate medical program at Monash University. The unit introduces four themes that are maintained over the degree: Personal and Professional Development, Population, Society, Health and Illness, Foundations of Medicine, and Clinical Skills.

STUDENTS: Approximately 320 students enrol in the undergraduate Medical Education program each year.

THE TEACHING TEAM: Assoc. Prof. Craig Hassed developed the unit and the strategies outlined in this case study. These strategies have been in place in the undergraduate medical program since 2002. Twelve tutors support the unit. They are teaching practitioners with professional experience in small group teaching and with personal and professional experience in the course content (Hassed et al., 2009)

MODE: 10 weeks of face-to-face lectures, supported by five 2-hour tutorials in groups of 15-16 students each.

ISSUE: IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Associate Professor Hassed and his colleagues recognised high levels of distress and burnout among their medical students. They were concerned about the implications that this distress would have on the students' capacities as medical practitioners. He explained that as future doctors, students needed to develop self-care and self-regulation skills: "A doctor who is not coping well or is less mindful is many times more likely to make clinical errors" (Monash University, 2009). Furthermore, as future doctors they will need clinical skills in mindfulness and lifestyle management as well as sustainable performance and communication skills.

AIM

To incorporate into the curriculum of a first-year unit a component that teaches students about the importance of their own personal and professional development, and to develop learning activities that highlight: (1) the mindfulness and lifestyle skills necessary to take responsibility for their own self-care and help-seeking, and (2) how their own strengths and limitations can impact upon performance.

SUBJECT DESIGN STRATEGIES

The strategies developed to meet this aim are:

- **Dedicating half of the semester's content on personal and professional development to teaching theory and practice related to student wellbeing**

One of the four themes of the undergraduate degree, personal and professional development, is allocated 10% of curriculum time in MED1011. The half-semester incorporates content related to students' awareness of their skills and activities that are designed to let students apply theory to their own lives. Content is predominantly embedded within the Health Enhancement Program (HEP). The HEP comprises two components: a mindfulness program and the ESSENCE lifestyle model. Detail about the content of the HEP program can be read in Hassed's and his colleagues' publications (Hassed et al., 2008; Hassed et al., 2009; Slonim et al., 2015).

- **Using student-directed learning in a reflective task in first year**

Students set their own agendas and goals in applying the concepts of the HEP to their personal lives. This approach gives students autonomy in how they learn the content. They keep a journal of their personal applications and submit entries to the tutor each week for feedback. There is a chance that students will disclose experiences of distress (i.e., personal, mental, or academic difficulties) to their tutors, and therefore strategies and pathways to further support must be clear to tutors before semester begins. For instance, if students disclose significant distress, then tutors refer them to student support counselling services for care (Hassed et al., 2008; Hassed et al., 2009).

- **Practicing and debriefing weekly homework tasks in first year**

As well as the self-directed learning, students are given weekly 'homework tasks' to practice mindfulness techniques learned in class. One hour of every tutorial is dedicated to discussing and debriefing their experiences with the mindfulness techniques and the other hour on the particular lifestyle topic for the week. The discussion is designed to help students articulate their experiences with the strategies and develop insight into mindfulness, the mind-body relationship and the factors governing their lifestyle choices. A range of behaviour change strategies are also explored and applied by the students. Personal application is voluntary but understanding core knowledge and skills is expected examinable.

- **Establishing a committed, professional and empathetic tutoring team**

Hassed advocates strongly for building a teaching team with professional experience in the discipline and in teaching, commitment to content, and capacity for empathy. The tutors in his course are all teaching practitioners (as the content is medicine, these include specialist doctors, general practitioners, psychologists, and counsellors). They act as role models, mentors, and personal "links" for students between their study and professional pathways.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Hassed and his colleagues have systematically evaluated the effectiveness of embedding these strategies into their first year unit, and have published their findings (Hassed et al., 2009; 2009; Slonim et al, 2015). They evaluate its effectiveness in relation to engagement in the course and to students' wellbeing.

In their first evaluation, over 90% of students reported using mindfulness practices in their lives outside the unit (Hassed et al., 2008). They also found that students had higher measures of wellbeing (across multiple scales) after the HEP (prior to mid-year exams) when compared to before the HEP (mid-semester). That mid-year exams are typically a stressful experience for students makes these evaluation findings even more remarkable.

Since 2008, various published and in-production evaluations by Hassed and his colleagues continue to find associations between the HEP and students' academic engagement and wellbeing (Hassed et al., 2009; Slonim et al., 2015). One paper in production, for example, reports positive correlations between mindfulness techniques and wellbeing and engagement in unit content (Opie, in production). The more that students adopted mindfulness techniques, the more engaged they were with course content across the curriculum and the higher their wellbeing.

The success of the HEP is also clear in its uptake into other disciplines and other universities. At Monash University, the mindfulness elements of the HEP have been integrated into other undergraduate programs including Physiotherapy, Pharmacy, Information Technology, and Master of Business Administration. The HEP is also being integrated into programs at other universities in Australia (e.g. Deakin University, University of Notre Dame) and internationally (e.g. Auckland University, New Zealand; University of Leicester, U.K.; University of Montreal, Canada).

3 INTERIOR VISUALISATION, B. DESIGN QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY



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TEACHING CONTEXT

INTERIOR VISUALISATION: is a first year undergraduate unit in the Bachelor of Design at Queensland University of Technology. Unlike other design units that focus on physical skills (e.g., drawing), this subject focuses on the development of metacognitive skills necessary for design practice.

STUDENTS: Approximately 180 – 190 students from various Schools/Faculties undertake this subject. Most students are enrolled in architecture, engineering, fashion design, or interior design programs.

THE TEACHING TEAM: Dr Marisha McAuliffe is the unit coordinator and is supported by a team of tutors who are design practitioners.

MODE: 12-week semester of face to face lectures and weekly tutorials, supported by the unit's learning management system.

ISSUE: IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Over a number of years the teaching team observed a high number of overwhelmed students in mid-semester. They recognised that first year students need better support in making the transition into university and academic life, and in developing an understanding of their skills and abilities. In design education, this includes metacognitive skills that are crucial for becoming design professionals

AIM

To design curriculum that helps first year students develop the metacognitive skills essential for design practice, and help them with their transition into academic life.

SUBJECT DESIGN STRATEGIES

The teaching staff adopt numerous strategies that can be identified as supporting student wellbeing:

- **Organising topics and structuring lectures around key skills**
Lectures are planned to introduce thinking styles alongside the core design theories, and to help students see the relevance of the skills and theories to professional design practice. Each lecture outlines how one thinking style might be applied to design drawings and visualisation in professional design. This helps students contextualise what they are learning as it is applied to real world design practice.
- **Embedding an activities-based tutorial program**
The tutorials are designed to provide opportunities to practice each thinking style, and reflect on how each thinking style can be applied to 'real life' design projects. The activities help students build the skills and knowledge required to complete their two assessment pieces so they can see how each tutorial contributes to the learning outcomes and assessment of the subject (See below). Each tutorial includes a 6-minute visualisation activity, in which students practice visualising the thinking style. These activities are designed to maximise students' experience of 'flow', which describes the experience of being completely immersed in an activity. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). The activities aim to reduce self-consciousness, remove concerns about failure, and promote self awareness.
- **Fostering meaningful interactions through classroom activities**
Many of the tutorial activities are designed to enable students to practice articulating their experience, receive constructive feedback from tutors and identify areas for improvement. The activities promote active discussion among peers as well as with tutors.
- **Designing assessment to develop students' metacognitive and self-assessment skills**
Assessment tasks involve written exercises in which students consider how the thinking styles apply to

their goals within the course. This assessment aims to provide a meaningful opportunity for them to consolidate the different thinking styles and practice metacognition through articulating their processes of using each approach. Students build on tutors' feedback from earlier assessment to become critics of their own work.

The assessments are designed to develop students' ability to reflect upon and evaluate their own skills and cognitive processes in meaningful ways. The experiences also encourage intuition and metacognition, which not only promote engagement and motivation in design, but also contribute to a greater sense of agency during panellist critiques in subsequent subjects.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Marisha evaluates her unit using a Unit Improvement Plan. The Unit Improvement Plan is completed during the semester by each teacher, and documents activities that are going well and activities that need improvement.

Evidence from the UIP, Student Engagement Survey, and teachers' perceptions during class, indicates improvements in the following areas:

- Compared to previous cohorts, most students are noticeably more confident by mid-semester and adept at articulating their synthesis and explaining their thinking processes to staff.
- Most students demonstrate improvement in their awareness of their own processes between the first assessment and the second assessment. Their improved skills reflect an increased confidence in using conceptual approaches to analyse their own work.
- Students are more deeply engaged in their learning, particularly in completing the activities and assessment tasks.

4 FIRST YEAR BIOLOGY, B. SCIENCE THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE



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TEACHING CONTEXT

Biology of Cells and Organisms is the biology subject offered in first semester, during the first-year of the Bachelor of Science at University of Melbourne.

STUDENTS: Almost 2,000 students enrol in the subject. Most of these students are studying a Bachelor of Science, but a small number are completing other degrees and enrol in biology as a breadth (elective) subject.

THE TEACHING TEAM: Associate Professor Dawn Gleeson and Dr Andrew Drinnan coordinate the subject, with support from 13 permanent part-time tutors.

MODE: 12-week semester, with optional homework tasks set in the first week. Students attend three lectures per week (delivered four times each week to accommodate the large cohort), one tutorial per week (25-27 students and one tutor per tutorial) and one lab class per fortnight (100 students and 8 lab demonstrators per lab).

ISSUE: IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Dawn and her colleagues were concerned about students' transition into university life. The transition can be a daunting experience, especially in large cohorts such as the biology student cohorts. The biggest challenge for the teaching team is helping students to feel as though they are known as individuals.

AIM

To ease the transition into university for first year biology students, especially by helping them develop a sense of belonging within the course.

SUBJECT DESIGN STRATEGIES

Dawn and her colleagues have been working to improve the students' transition into university for over a decade. They recognise that solutions do not emerge quickly or easily, but take time to develop and evaluate. Some solutions have been successful, and some have not.

- **Ensuring consistency among the teaching team**

Tutors are employed on an ongoing part-time basis to ensure cohesiveness and consistency among the teaching team. Modelling this to students sets the precedent for a cohesive and sharing student cohort. Tutors are also regularly available to students outside of class hours. Their office is located near the near students' collaborative learning space, and they have rostered drop-in sessions for students seeking further

support or advice. Employing tutors on permanent contract has benefits for the department in general, including:

- A teaching team that is committed to providing high quality learning activities (i.e., unlike casual tutors, they are invested in how the subject will run in the following year);
 - Reduced costs associated with the recruitment, training and orientation of new cohorts of tutors each year;
 - A more consistent teaching approach among tutors as they meet regularly with each other and the subject coordinator to discuss issues and share materials.
- **Introducing the students to all disciplines within the faculty**
This year the biology teaching team ran a "Welcome Day", in collaboration with the other five schools in the Faculty (Medicine, Dentistry, Health Sciences, Population and Global Health, Psychological Science and Biomedical Science). Disciplinary experts from each school gave short presentations about their programs.
The Welcome Day was an opportunity to expose students to the breadth of subjects offered within the faculty, and to let students meet some of the senior academic teaching team.

- **Encouraging students to interact in class**

Out-of-class interaction has been encouraged through various initiatives (e.g., arranging informal study groups and a Facebook page), but these seem to end if students don't see immediate benefits. Instead, an in-class approach has been adopted, in which teachers assign students to specific seats and ask students to work with the person sitting next to them. This forces students to meet someone new. It reduces anxiety around pairing up for activities for students who don't know anyone, provides consistency in how the class runs, and provides an informal 'buddy' system.

- **Addressing academic diversity with online resources**

Students who have not previously studied biology can feel left behind and out-of-place from very early on in semester. To reduce these anxieties, the teaching team have developed short videos that explain various concepts of biology (aptly called "biobytes") and demonstrate procedures used in practical laboratory sessions ("tech tips"). The biobytes and tech tips are paired with online self-assessment quizzes and made available in the subjects' learning management system from orientation week. Students are encouraged to use these resources before semester begins: for new students, the resources are a source of relief and early support. For advanced students, the resources are an opportunity to build their confidence, revise, and test their knowledge at a university level.

- **Helping students to be proactive in addressing their special needs**

Disclosure of the need for special support can be a barrier for university students, especially if the issue is related to mental health (e.g., a person with social anxiety disorder who is overwhelmed at the thought of prac work) or religious or lifestyle commitments (for example, a vegan who wishes to not dissect animals). There are two strategies that Dawn and her teaching team use in addressing this issue:

- As course coordinator, Dawn reminds students on a weekly basis to get in touch with her as soon as they can if they think they might need further support or alternative activities. These

reminders appear in lectures and emailed notifications to all students. She meets with each student who discloses that they need support, to build with them a plan of support and any alternative assessments. Meeting with students and developing appropriate plans can take a lot of time, but Dawn sees this practice as essential for encouraging students to feel confident in taking responsibility of their academic pathways and seeking help.

- The teaching team have developed an online resource that is presented as a short online quiz called "How is uni going?". The resource is made available to students at the mid-semester break. The resource asks students to rate from 1 to 7 how they are feeling about a range of issues at university (housing, finance, academic work, health, etc.). If students respond with a low rating, immediate feedback appears with stories from other students who have felt the same way, links to services that can help, both within the university and the wider community. This resource is now used across the faculty.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Dawn and her colleagues have systematic and anecdotal evidence of the success of their teaching approaches:

- They have seen an increase in their Subject Experience Survey (SES) scores over the past few years, particularly regarding the item "I feel part of the community". This item is of particular importance for a department concerned with improving students' sense of belonging amidst a large cohort.
- The rate of participation and positive responses in the resource "How is uni going?" indicated that the students were faring well mid-way through semester. When the resource was first released, findings revealed that students were not comfortable approaching the lecturers or the tutoring team. Strategies were immediately discussed for improving interactions between students and teachers, including the strategies discussed above.
- Emails to lecturers and tutors from students at the end of each semester thanking the teaching team for their efforts.

5 THIRD YEAR MUSIC THEATRE, B. FINE ARTS VICTORIAN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS



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TEACHING CONTEXT

The Bachelor of Fine Arts (Music Theatre) is one of seven streams of the Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne. It is a three-year degree that features an intense and student-centred approach to skills training in performance arts: dancing, singing, and acting.

STUDENTS: 20 students in each cohort, selected from auditions with over 500 hundred people around Australia, each year. Many students travel from interstate to study the degree.

THE TEACHING TEAM: Margot Fenley is the program convenor. She coordinates the third year of the program and Christopher Nolan coordinates the subjects in first and second year.

MODE: Students participate in dancing, acting, and singing classes in studios, lead by teaching practitioners. The training in these subjects focuses on each skill individually and in combination (classes in acting through song, song and dance classes etc). They also study historical and theoretical issues related to performance in one lecture and tutorial based subject. There is a heavy expectation of independent rehearsal and practice and a number of public performance projects in the latter stage of the course.

ISSUE: IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

A significant issue facing teachers in Fine Arts is the high prevalence of clinical depression, anxiety, and eating disorders among performing arts students. The concern for students' mental health is also reflected in the high rate of suicide among trained performers.

In many cases, clinical conditions are pre-existing, developed prior to undergraduate study. However, in an intense program such as the Bachelor of Fine Arts, students' anxieties can be exacerbated by continuously shifting between different cultural paradigms of the three streams: acting, singing and dancing. There is a difference in language and teaching style across the various disciplines: dance teaching traditionally offers critique by 'correction' (inferring a clear right and wrong); voice teachers use language like "safe or unsafe" vocal choices, whereas the cliché of acting teaching is that there is no 'right and wrong', with students encouraged to explore all possibilities and embrace uncertainty. Shifting between these positions can be mentally exhausting.

As students approach graduation, their anxieties are further compounded by the uncertainty of future

employment (with over 90% of performers unemployed at any given time) and lack of support networks for students upon graduation, especially for those who have travelled interstate to study at VCA.

AIM

To help students develop skills and attitudes to reduce anxieties within the degree and beyond graduation. Margot and her team are still finding ways to address this issue, continually asking the question "is there a better way to address this?" The strategies below go some way towards answering that question, however the teaching team want to acknowledge that they feel they still have a long way to go.

SUBJECT DESIGN STRATEGIES

- **Creating a safe space to perform**

Margot teaches students to practice "unconditional positive regard" – a therapeutic approach developed by the psychologist Karl Rogers. This approach requires the professional to put aside any personal relationships or biases, and engage with colleagues with curiosity and hope. This is a critical skill for the students as a means of dealing with the inevitable

social issues that arise among small cohorts working under intense conditions. Removing personal biases allows students to feel safe and supported by their classmates as they learn new performance techniques together. It will continue to be a critical skill for their success working with other people in auditions, rehearsals, performances, and tours. The concept of unconditional positive regard is introduced to first year students during orientation week. Most attention to developing the skill occurs in the 1st year acting subjects, reinforced throughout the course and is critically important during pressured times, like 3rd year showcase.

The teachers reinforce the concept of a “safe space” by verbally acknowledging when something is happening between students, such as clear social tensions, tiredness, or disengagement. By acknowledging the shift in dynamics between students when they see it, the teaching staff and students can work to immediately change it.

Unconditional positive regard is modelled through staff exhibiting no personal bias towards students, giving equal attention and time to each student when working on the floor in front of the class and using supportive language whilst offering critique. Whilst it is important that students become aware of unhelpful habits (“you have a tendency before singing to lift your shoulders and tense your fingers”) it is important that they recognise that the habit is separate from their own self, and is also changeable. The teachers demonstrate unconditional regard by giving each student equal time and attention during class. In some classes, such as the presentation class, equal time giving feedback on a students’ performance is strictly monitored.

- **Using language to create safe ways for students to reflect**

Language plays a big role in establishing a culture of growth and development in the acting classes. For instance, phrases such as “crushed it” and “nailed it” are banned from acting classes, because they infer that the student hasn’t learned anything from the exercise, and also shift the attention onto false, external thresholds of a “perfect” or “complete” performance. Instead, students are encouraged to reflect on the aspects of the exercise that worked or didn’t work for them (and why). Similarly, the idea that there are multiple truths (i.e., multiple interpretations of a piece) is demonstrated by encouraging students to give feedback in the first person: “that piece made me feel uncomfortable” instead of as objective facts: “the piece was uncomfortable”. The former allows other students to offer other views without feeling conflicted. When a student talks in third person (“it

was ...”), the teachers actively stop them and ask them to repeat their reflection in the first person (“I felt ...”).

- **Helping students to explore and grow from experiences of “glorious failure”**

Margot and her teaching colleagues help the students to see value in failure. Performers constantly face critique of their work, their appearance, and their technique. Fear of failure in this profession can be crippling. Further, so much of what they do is internalised that they can perceive issues during a performance as their failure as a person. To reduce students’ fear of failure, Margot and her teaching colleagues teach students to embrace and articulate issues that arise, and progress through them. They contextualise failure as “the place where you often learn the most”. When students felt they failed, Margot and her team encourage students to identify what was happening to them, what they could do about it, and how they can grow from that experience.

- **Encouraging a love of learning**

Margot thinks that fostering a love of learning is much more important than teaching objective skills. Her aim – and she says this explicitly to students – is that students arrive at the end of final year saying “I am a continuing artist in the making” – rather than saying “I am complete and ready for work”.

- **Encouraging autonomy and self-management**

Students are encouraged to take control of their own approach to learning and studying, in terms of how they structure their practice of course-related pieces each week, and how they will structure their practice for the rest of their lives. Two examples of this encouragement include: (a) a whole-school meeting in which teachers and students discussed how students structure their practice time; and (b) helping final year students build a plan for themselves for the six months following graduation. The plan is essential for students feeling as though they are not only leaving the school, but moving on to something else – a project of their own.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Although there is no systematic evaluation of the impact of these strategies, and Margot and her team feel the issues are still very prevalent in students lives, there have been some clear cultural shifts towards understanding mental health issues. For example:

- The rate of students accessing services such as Head Space is much higher than in previous years.
- In the last 12 months, students have actively campaigned the University to return a local counselling service to their campus.

6 CAPSTONE PRACTICUM, B. EDUCATION QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY



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TEACHING CONTEXT

EDB014/15 forms part of the capstone experience in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), at QUT. This capstone experience includes an 8-week professional field experience component.

STUDENTS: Approximately 80 students enrol in the Bachelor of Education each year. Approximately 60 enrol in the capstone units.

THE TEACHING TEAM: Amanda McFadden coordinates the final professional field experience (EDB014) and the Internship experience (EDB015) for early childhood education pre-service teachers.

MODE: 8-week placement at an early childhood context (e.g., kindergarten, primary school) during second semester.

ISSUE: IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Amanda and her colleagues including university supervisors, fellow lecturers and host teachers recognised a high level of anxiety among undergraduate pre-service teachers prior to, and following final field experience and internship. These anxieties were especially pertinent for fourth year students during internships, where teaching responsibilities increase alongside prolonged field experience placements. Pre-service teachers who do not have effective strategies for dealing with challenges that arise in their teaching are particularly affected.

AIM

To help pre-service teachers: (1) develop attitudes and strategies for coping with the anxieties and pressures of prolonged field experiences; and (2) make the transition from pre-service teacher to professional teacher.

SUBJECT DESIGN STRATEGIES

The strategies developed to meet this aim include activities and assessments introduced prior to and during the final professional experience and Internship:

- **Embedding a pre-placement conference in the semester 2 orientation week, to build students' professional teaching identity and mirror professional development in the field**

Talking to pre-service teachers as 'future colleagues' creates a professional dynamic that differs from expert-student dynamic in most undergraduate classes. It empowers pre-service teachers to position themselves as future teachers, and to think about how the concepts and tasks that they are learning as

pre-service teachers will apply in their professional lives as teachers. This dynamic also provides an avenue for pre-service teachers to reposition the increased responsibilities of their 4th year Internship as indicators of their strengthened identity and capacities as teachers.

This intensive 2-day conference provides various opportunities for pre-service teachers to begin to see themselves as professional teachers, including:

- Panel discussions with teachers who are in their first year of teaching;
 - Sessions with principals and experts about emerging issues in early childhood education and care; and
 - Professional conversations with practicing teachers and with peers.
- **Using a portfolio assessment piece to document each student's 'enacted practice' during placement**
The portfolio piece is an opportunity to practice developing a professional teaching portfolio, which is an increasingly necessary tool for educators. The portfolio piece includes a synopsis of the pre-service teachers' teaching practice, and a reflection of how their actions developed their understanding of teaching and learning with a particular focus on the issues discussed at the conference.
 - **Creating opportunities for feedback**
A variety of feedback tools are used throughout the conference and throughout the final professional experience and Internship.

- During the conference feedback tools include discussion boards, blogs, key survey, email feedback, ‘one word to describe the session’ post-it notes, and sheets of cardboard for comments are posted on walls. These provide avenues for students to express their thoughts, questions, or concerns to academic staff or to each other in a timely manner. Comments are presented in a follow up online collaboration session and responded to in ways that are designed to be useful for all pre-service teachers.
- During the Internship feedback on progress is provided through professional conversations with the appointed mentoring teacher, the University Supervisor and the Unit Coordinator. It is also provided in email communication from the teaching team, and on comments from peers, tutors, and professional colleagues in the portfolio documents and through discussion boards.

- **Adopting accessible and current media formats**

Amanda worked with her university’s counselling service to develop a podcast (digital audio recording) about the issues that pre-service teachers face during placement, to be made available prior to and throughout placement. Podcasts are increasingly popular and familiar media formats among people under the age of 35. The podcast, called “In conversation”, covers common issues that pre-service teachers face, and ways that the counselling service advises them to address such issues. The podcast has been so successful that it is now offered to all students across the Education program. There are unique issues associated with lengthy professional experiences and this was a way to target known challenges that pre-service teachers face in the field.

- **Introducing failure as a learning opportunity early in the conference**

The first lecture to students begins with a discussion about failure, prompted by a visual aid (slide) stating: “FAIL: First Attempt In Learning” and a recount of the difficulties Amanda faced in postgraduate studies. This attitude is central to Carol Dweck’s “open mindset”, which reframes failure as a learning opportunity to develop students’ work instead of some sort of final judgement of the student as a person. Pre-service teachers with open mindsets are better placed to cope with anxieties and issues on placement because they can see the difficulties as learning opportunities that help them develop their skills as professional teachers. Presenting this discussion as a lecture provides a safe way introduce pre-service teachers to this way of thinking about failure, and for them to reflect on their own experiences and past opportunities to learn. This approach shifts the focus from performing on field experiences to learning while on field experiences.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

The pre-Internship conference was developed, and is refined each year by drawing on existing evidence of good-practice models from existing capstone models and from large datasets of practice in teacher education (Mayer, 2015), so that organisers can be confident that the conference will be effective in providing pre-service teachers with relevant graduate experience. Amanda is currently applying for funding to systematically evaluate the conference. In the mean time, she has anecdotal evidence that supports her confidence in its effectiveness.

With the incorporation of multiple forms of feedback and an emphasis on the pre-service teachers as future colleagues, Amanda has noticed that there is more open dialogue between pre-service teachers and teachers about how they are experiencing and dealing with difficult situations. These dialogues happen during the actual difficult event, rather than after the event has occurred, which means that pre-service teachers are building agency in taking control over challenging situations. Amanda sees this dialogue as a crucial indicator of pre-service teachers’ ability to articulate their challenges and find ways to proactively address those difficulties.

Although only anecdotal, evidence of the success of the program also comes from correspondence with program graduates. These comments are overwhelmingly positive, with statements such as “I feel like a new teacher now”, “Amanda has reassured me, particularly at the start of the degree, that I can do it”, and “with your encouragement and advice I was able to have a more than successful field experience”. “Amanda’s support has been invaluable ... She guides us, pulls us back on track, and provides us with so many wonderful experiences”.

Over the past two years there has been a decrease in pre-service teachers accessing the support of Amanda as Unit Coordinator for challenges while on their field experience. Of note as well is the peer support and collaboration through discussion board threads and posts that show a clear uptake in final year pre-service teachers talking about their mindset and how they are reframing challenges on their final field and Internship experiences.

In 2015 a group of pre-service teachers at the conference discussed setting up their own early career sub-committee group to support pre-service teachers and early career teachers. After discussing this idea more broadly within pre-service teacher networks and professional networks these pre-service teachers have combined to develop and sustain an early career sub-committee of Early Childhood Australia Qld. In 2016 this is now a fully functioning sub-committee with members including pre-service teachers across other Queensland Universities and early career teachers working in the field.

3 TEACHING STRATEGIES

This chapter reviews evidence-based teaching approaches that have been shown to enhance student wellbeing, engagement and competence in a range of contexts. It also provides examples of how the essentials of student mental wellbeing can be supported through diverse teaching practices.

This chapter is relevant to both new and experienced academic educators with teaching responsibilities.

This chapter answers the questions: How can academic educators create learning environments that support student wellbeing? What can research supervisors do to better support the wellbeing of PhD candidates?

3.1 HOW TEACHERS CAN SUPPORT STUDENT WELLBEING

Educational research shows that what academic educators do in the design of classes, and how they interact with students, has a strong impact on student engagement in learning, including the approaches they adopt and the learning goals they develop (intrinsic or instrumental). How educators teach and interact with students creates a 'learning climate' that can affect student learning and wellbeing.

As outlined in 1.3 Wellbeing essentials, student mental wellbeing is supported when teachers create a learning climate that nurtures and sustains autonomous motivation through regular experiences of belonging, positive relationships, autonomy and competence. While these experiences can be supported through the curriculum (see 2.2), they can also be promoted by teaching practices in the classroom.

AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION SUPPORTS WELLBEING (AND LEARNING)

Autonomous motivation – acting on the basis of one's interests or intrinsic goals – is key to mental wellbeing. When our actions are self-owned and self-endorsed, we have a sense of being our 'authentic selves' which, in turn, enables us to experience belonging, positive relationships with others, autonomy and competence – the 'wellbeing essentials' or psychological nutrients that provide people with the internal resources to effectively manage challenges, difficulties and demands.

My wellbeing would be enhanced if teachers would foster a classroom environment based on communal mutual respect and sharing rather than a hierarchical/high school classroom-type environment.

(Arts student)

TEACHING APPROACHES CAN FOSTER (OR UNDERMINE) STUDENTS' AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION

Teachers' interpersonal style and teaching practice can either foster or undermine students' autonomous motivation for study.

'Autonomy-supportive' teachers aim to support students to own and invest in their learning, to connect with their inner motivational resources (emerging interests or important goals) and make learning personally meaningful. To this end, autonomy-supportive teachers use a range of strategies and techniques that assist students to feel that their actions are agentic (and self-determined) rather than being 'controlled' by external powers and demands.

By contrast, teachers who exercise a 'controlling' teaching style motivate and engage students by reference to external standards ('employers are only interested in the top 20% of graduates in this course'), performance anxieties ('pay attention, this is on the exam'), and contingent rewards ('excellent – I see you've been reading my textbook'). While these strategies work to motivate students in the short term, they are not sustaining in the longer term as they direct students to focus on avoiding 'failure' or pursuing external indicators of approval and achievement, rather than deep learning and personal growth.

LEARNING CLIMATES AND AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION

In addition to directly fostering students' inner motivational resources and autonomy (or sense of volition), autonomy-supportive teachers create learning climates that support positive interpersonal relationships (between students and between themselves and students), and build students' sense of self-efficacy by scaffolding learning.

Positive relationships and a climate of equality, respect and fairness among students enable all students to take advantage of the available learning opportunities and explore emerging interests. A sense that one can become good at new skills and master new knowledge – with appropriate time and effort – is also essential for academic motivation and achievement (Vansteenkiste, Lens and Deci, 2006).

A teacher's interpersonal approach to students and their learning – characterised by the goal of encouraging students to be self-initiating (rather than pressuring them to behave in certain ways) – can affect student wellbeing. Key strategies for promoting autonomy-supportive learning environments are explained and examples are provided below. Keep in mind, however, that use of one or more of these strategies in isolation will not create a learning climate that students perceive as supporting their autonomous motivation.

Teaching practice strategies and examples to support the wellbeing essentials

AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION

Some strategies:

- Design learning tasks and selecting problems or examples that connect with students' interests, preferences, curiosity and current knowledge
- Help students to make meaning through their learning and understand the value of the knowledge and skills being developed e.g. help students think about their futures as professionals, rather than students who are finishing a course, by addressing them as 'future colleagues'
- Help students to connect concepts and skills being learned with their lives and work (relevance) e.g. discuss how disciplinary concepts relate to current events or issues.
- Assist students to set personal learning goals that are realistic, meaningful and challenging.

BELONGING

Some strategies:

- Demonstrate unconditional positive regard for students (not regard contingent on performance or selected attributes)
- Understand that some students need more time than others to grasp concepts and skills
- Design learning tasks that value and draw out diverse perspectives, experiences and forms of prior knowledge e.g. spend five minutes at the start of each class asking students to share something that they are proud of.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Some strategies:

- Foster collaborative and cooperative learning that helps students feel connected to peers e.g. encouraging students to work and study together outside of class
- Be friendly and approachable e.g. spend "consultation time" in the student learning hub, or on Skype, so that students can meet you in a familiar space
- Demonstrate interest in students' questions and ideas
- Understand students' perspectives, concerns and experiences e.g. construct mindful, considerate replies in discussion forums.

AUTONOMY

Some strategies:

- Provide meaningful choices (that reflect students' interests and are not too complex) and facilitating flexible approaches to learning
- Provide justifications for required tasks and skills so that students can 'internalise' and self-endorse the reasons for the activity/unit
- Acknowledge and accept expressions of negative feelings and affect – e.g. 'I appreciate that some students find this task/activity/topic boring. Let me explain why it's important...'
- Use language that minimises pressure and control – e.g. 'You might like to try... ' rather than directives and 'should/must' statements.
- Help students see that there is more than one way to progress and improve throughout the course

COMPETENCE

Some strategies:

- Scaffold the early stages of student learning so that students experience achievement and reward for effort e.g. Get students to 'showcase' their work to each other in low-stakes, non-assessed environments
- Design, simplify or increase the complexity of learning tasks and problems so that they provide optimal challenge for students
- Provide informational (rather than judgmental) feedback e.g. include regular feedback from different sources including self-reflection, other students, the teacher, and third-party sources outside of the classroom such as editors of online journals or Wikipedia
- Assist students to study and learn effectively, so that they become increasingly self-directed and self-regulated e.g. run activities in class that require the skills needed for the assessment but use different content and are not graded

A larger collection of Good Practice Examples of teaching practices that support student mental wellbeing can be found at unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/teaching-practice/examples

SUMMARY:

- ‘Autonomy-supportive’ teachers use teaching practices that help students feel their actions are agentic (and self-determined) rather than being ‘controlled’ by external powers and demands.
- Teachers who exercise a ‘controlling’ teaching style motivate and engage students by reference to external standards, performance anxieties and contingent rewards. These strategies work to motivate students in the short term but they are not sustaining in the longer term and do not support deep learning, personal growth or wellbeing.
- There are a number of strategies which can help foster autonomy-supportive learning environments and allow students to experience autonomous motivation, belonging, positive relationships, autonomy and competence.

3.2 JUST GOOD TEACHING?

Having reviewed strategies and examples of autonomy-supportive teaching practice in 3.1, you may well ask whether teaching for student wellbeing is just the same as effective or good teaching. In many ways, autonomy-supportive teaching and effective teaching do overlap significantly. In his influential book, “What the best college teachers do”, Ken Bain (2005) identifies six common characteristics that are shared by recognised excellent teachers across various disciplines. These common practices also support students’ mental wellbeing.

1 Effective teachers develop techniques to help students grasp fundamental principles and organising concepts in the discipline.

Effective teachers, Bain explains, “know how to simplify and clarify complex subjects, to cut to the heart of the matter with provocative insights, and they can think about their own thinking in the discipline” (p.16). Students develop a deeper understanding of the subject when teachers help them to find connections and apply the concepts and skills they are learning to their lives and work. In addition, deep learning is fostered when students become aware of their own relevant prior knowledge, misconceptions, beliefs and values – and to unlearn these, as needed (Angelo, 2012).

2 Effective teachers focus on student learning objectives in preparing to teach.

Excellent teachers adopt an inquiry-based approach to their teaching, and ask fundamental questions such as:

- What should students be able to do as a result of my teaching?
- How can I best help and encourage them to develop those abilities?
- How can I help students understand the quality and progress of their learning?

We found that the best teachers usually have strong faith in the ability of students to learn and in the power of healthy challenge, but they also have an appreciation that excessive anxiety and tension can hinder thinking.

Ken Bain 2005, p.96

Effective teachers recognise that no single approach can work for every student and adopt a variety of approaches to cater for the diversity among students (Bain, 2005).

3 Effective teachers have high expectations of their students and believe in students' ability to learn.

This means helping students to set and maintain realistically high and personally meaningful learning goals and expectations for academic success, and encouraging them to invest adequate time and effort in their academic work (Angelo, 2012). It also means looking for and appreciating the individual value of each student, and their different needs. Effective teachers recognise that no single approach can work for every student and adopt a variety of approaches to cater for the diversity among students (Bain, 2005). They also help students to learn how to study effectively, so that they become increasingly self-directed learners.

4 Effective teachers create challenging, yet supportive conditions in which learners feel a sense of control over their education and work collaboratively with others.

This involves stimulating students' interest in the subject by getting them to confront complex questions or important problems, and do authentic tasks that challenge them to grapple with new ideas, rethink their assumptions and examine their existing views. It also means creating an environment in which students feel they have some control over their learning, where they are encouraged to work collaboratively, where they feel their work will be considered fairly and honestly, and an environment in which they make mistakes, fail and receive feedback before any summative assessment (Bain, 2005).

5 Effective teachers display openness with students and treat them with respect and concern.

Students appreciate teachers who are relatable, approachable and who display openness about their own experiences in the discipline. This may include openly discussing their interest and curiosity in the subject, as well the challenges and frustrations they have experienced in grappling with complex ideas. Bain's research identifies "a strong trust in students" as being a quality reflected by highly effective teachers. These teachers believe that their students want to learn and assume until proven otherwise, that their students have the ability to learn (Bain, 2005).

6 Effective teachers adopt a systematic approach to evaluate their own efforts in teaching and make changes.

Excellent teachers have a systematic approach to assess their own efforts in teaching, often by looking at student learning and the extent to which the objectives have been met. In other words, they consider assessment of student learning and evaluation of their teaching as being closely related. Early on in the course good teachers try to find out as much as possible about their students, to explore their ambitions and

approaches to learning, as well as what existing skills and mental models they brought with them. Throughout the course, they continue their efforts in getting to know their students to find out how they are progressing and what changes could be made to better support their learning (Bain, 2005).

These six common practices of effective teachers lead to enhanced student engagement in learning and support the essentials of mental wellbeing, particularly autonomous motivation, competence, and autonomy.

3.3 SPOTLIGHT: PHD SUPERVISION

Supervising research higher degree (RHD) candidates is a form of intensive teaching where the interpersonal relationship between supervisors and students is particularly critical to students' experience and study outcomes.

As experienced supervisors are aware, although pursuing an RHD is generally an extremely rewarding experience, many graduate researchers struggle at times with feelings of isolation, and a lack of 'connectedness' to their peers, their departments and the institution. Some students also come to question the outcomes and value of a research higher degree. It is therefore common for many graduate researchers, at some point in their candidature, to become de-motivated, fall in a slump and experience periods of psychological distress.

One of the key themes emerging from our interviews with experienced PhD supervisors was the importance of facilitating peer interaction and support:

Encourage people to support one another. Their projects might not overlap but they do connect. Get people in the lab to help each other. If a student can't do it, get someone who does know alongside so that they can pass on their knowledge.

(PhD supervisor, BioScience)

Mainly it's about peer support, so ensuring that you have a strong network around the students so that the students can form their own social networks... they play sport together, they go out for lunch together, I think that's extremely important.

(PhD supervisor, Engineering)

Life in universities and doing research and a PhD is incredibly rewarding intellectually but it also needs to be rewarding socially and collegially to be fully rounded.

(PhD supervisor, History)

In the early days, I was really worried about getting a job. I had my scholarship, but I knew that wouldn't be enough to cover rent and everything. It affected my studies because I was worried all the time. I was worried about not being able to get a job in my discipline, as well. It would keep me up at night, so I wasn't getting much sleep.

(PhD candidate, Psychology)

Bain's research identifies "a strong trust in students" as being a quality reflected by highly effective teachers.

No supervisor wants to give you negative feedback – to tell you that something isn't there yet, or it's below a standard. So instead, they either give you neutral feedback or they tell you nothing at all. And doing that – neutral or no feedback – is more destructive motivationally than if they had just been open and honest with you in the first place.

(PhD candidate, Education)

Video interviews published on unistudentwellbeing.edu.au explore the experiences of supervision and managing student mental health with five experienced postgraduate supervisors. The videos include techniques for establishing good relationships for supervision, identifying when graduate students are struggling, and ensuring ongoing support for PhD students.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT: The Experience of PhD Students

A range of institutional, disciplinary, social, personal and psychological factors can influence the PhD process, therefore there is no single solution to ensuring success (Norton, 2011). Two prominent factors that appear in the research are:

- Supervision: Naylor et al. (2016) report the PhD students see their supervisors as a major source of support, but also a major source of distress if the supervision was not adequate, or if they had a poor relationship with their supervisor. The most effective supervisory teams are those that can offer research direction, methodology, emotional support, and administrative procedures (Satariyan, Getenet, Gube & Muhammad, 2015)
- Relationships: Family and peer support, and informal and formal mentoring are important for PhD students' success, whereas persistent feelings of isolation or lack of mentoring can lead to attrition (Leonard et al., 2006; Lunsford, 2012; Webb, Wangmo, Ewen, Teaster & Hatch, 2009).

3.4 LIFE HACKS FOR TEACHING

For busy academics with competing (and pressing) demands, it may be challenging to re-design curriculum or develop new ways to facilitate learning that support students' mental wellbeing. Aware of the pressures that academic teachers experience, [here we offer seven simple tips that all time-poor educators can use \(with little preparation\) to enhance autonomy-supportive learning environments and support student wellbeing.](#)

1 How can you show students that you are interested in getting to know them, their backgrounds, interests and aspirations?

- Ask your admissions office (or student centre) for a break down of the backgrounds of students in your course (e.g. international, mature aged, first in family etc.). Mention in the early weeks that you are aware of the diversity you have in the class, citing relevant enrolment data.
- Seek information from students about themselves. For large classes, use your online learning management system to administer a simple questionnaire (perhaps multiple choice) asking students a few questions about themselves – for example, their prior learning in the subject area; their main interests in the subject; any relevant work or practical experience; and skills they believe they need to develop further (e.g. writing skills, reading etc.). The automatically generated report will provide you with a snapshot of students' interests.

For smaller classes, it can be informative to ask students to write a paragraph introducing themselves – you may want to ask students to comment on their prior learning, their interests or what they hope to get out of the subject.

- Communicate to students what you know about the group and tell them (judiciously) what you have learned from their questionnaire responses or written introductions (e.g. the group's prior learning, interests and experience). Also let students know how this information will inform what you do in the subject or how the subject will address their interests and goals.

2 How can you help students connect with their peers from day one?

There are many examples of ice breaker activities (see resources section at unistudentwellbeing.edu.au), but an easy and time-efficient strategy for the first (and subsequent) class is to:

- Give students 5 minutes to meet the person sitting next to them (or in front/behind) and find the answer to two questions 1) “What is the main reason you’re doing this subject?”; and 2) “What’s been the highlight of your university experience so far?”
- At the end of the 5 minutes, put up a multiple choice of possible reasons for the first question, for example, a) “because I have to”; b) “I’m interested in the subject”; c) “I heard it’s a good/easy subject” d) “other”. Then, ask for a show of hands (or use auto-response technology), and ask for a couple of examples from people who chose “other” (there will usually be some humorous responses, which will help create a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere).
- In the next class, give students a couple of minutes again to talk to the person next to them, but remember to give them a specific task or question for them to talk about.
- If you’re teaching online, ask students to post a 30-second video introducing themselves or to post an introductory paragraph and respond to at least one other student’s post. Some online lecturers also set up a short quiz or poll to help students get to know each other.

3 How can you help students feel that they can relate to you and that you understand the pressures they face?

In class, or as an introduction to yourself online, tell students something about yourself - what interests you most about the subject, what you enjoy most about teaching and/or a challenge you have faced and overcome in academic life (e.g. grappling with statistics or overcoming a dread of public speaking). The goal here is to help students feel that you are relatable and that you understand that the subject material can sometimes be hard to grasp.

Certainly in my experience when a student is stressed, they tend to disengage, they tend to slow down the rate at which they are working, they tend to isolate themselves so that they don't tend to be as engaged and focussed on their work or research.

(Ph D supervisor, Engineering)



Acknowledge the pressures students face (e.g. from assessment tasks in other subjects/units) and assist them to meet their commitments in your unit/subject by letting them know where you expect them to be up to at key points. Also, to help students feel supported, communicate encouragingly (face to face, email or posting online) at important times in the semester – e.g. to wish them well for mid-semester break, to remind them of your (limited) availability around assignment due dates, and to wish them well for exams during SWOT Vac.

4 How can you help students feel they have input into the subject?

At the beginning of the subject, tell students what you have learned and applied from the last subject evaluation results and how you have taken student feedback into consideration – for example, by reordering material, adding revision tools, or introducing breaks in long classes. If this is the first time you are teaching the subject, ask the subject coordinator or the previous teacher what they learned from student feedback in the subject or other related subjects and share this information with your students. The goal here is to help students feel that you are interested in taking students' views into consideration and improving their learning experience.

After a few weeks, administer a mid-term survey and ask for student feedback – e.g. 1) What works well in this subject? 2) What could be improved in this subject 3) What specific suggestions can you offer for the rest of semester? Then address the comments in the following class by letting students know what you can and will change as well as what you cannot change and why.

5 How can you communicate that the subject matter is intrinsically interesting?

Most academics are enthusiastic about the subjects they teach, but not all communicate this enthusiasm to students. It is important to tell students why the subject is fascinating to you, why it's important to learn and how it's related to the world around them. As one experienced lecturer said, "even if you're not very passionate about the subject, or teaching, make students think you are so they

become more engaged and positive about the subject”. You can tell students that this is one of your favourite subjects to teach, even if that is stretching the truth. Another tip from an experienced educator is to look at a funny you-tube clip or listen to an upbeat piece of music before entering the class – if you do not find the teaching material particularly interesting, appearing enthusiastic and energised will suffice.

6 How can you show students that their learning has relevance to the world around them?

Students’ motivation for learning can be supported if they connect what they are learning to the world around them. But you do not need to make all the connections. You can create an early assignment or task that asks students to identify the relevance of what they’re learning by connecting the content to ‘real world’ problems, events, potential future jobs, or to issues in society more broadly. Another strategy here is to get students to send you (or post on an LMS page) current articles, links and/or video clips that they come across (including in various social media that they use) with a brief comment on how it relates to learning in the subject. Collate and publish these as a resource for all students.

7 How can you make students feel that they have the ability to learn and succeed?

This can be achieved by setting an interesting but achievable task early on in the subject that will enable students to experience reward for effort and a sense of accomplishment. It may be particularly meaningful if the task requires students to draw on and adapt their prior learning and experiences. Give encouraging, positive feedback early on and remind students that while the material can be challenging, with effort it is possible for everyone to satisfy the unit learning objectives.

Also help create a climate where students feel able to learn from mistakes by reminding them that they probably will make mistakes, like you did when you first encountered the subject, but that this is a positive and normal part of the learning process.

A larger collection of Good Practice Examples of teaching practices that support student mental wellbeing can be found at:

unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/teaching-practice/examples



4 DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Contemporary university students face numerous challenges and stressors and a significant proportion of them experience mental health difficulties during their time at university. Responding to and supporting students in distress can be challenging for academic educators.

This chapter offers practical strategies and advice from experienced educators and mental health professionals on how to have difficult conversations and communications with students experiencing distress or disclosing sensitive personal information. See Chapter 5 for advice on maintaining your own wellbeing while supporting students.

This chapter answers the questions: What can you say that is helpful to a student who is distressed or discloses personal trauma or abuse? What is and isn't your role?

4.1 ENGAGING WITH STUDENTS IN DISTRESS: WHAT IS YOUR ROLE?

All academic staff with teaching responsibilities are expected to take an interest in their students' learning and to provide associated 'pastoral care'. However, unless you have specific responsibilities for student-advising (in which case you will likely receive specialist training), it is generally not your role to counsel distressed students or support students to manage emotional or psychological difficulties. Students who may be experiencing difficulties are best referred to mental health and associated professional services for that support.

That said, mental health difficulties often impair a student's ability to study effectively or complete their coursework. It is therefore, within the academic teaching role to help students find strategies and support to manage the effects of mental health difficulties on their academic studies.

As a general principle, the confidentiality of any sensitive information that a student discloses to you should be maintained. **However, a duty of care to prevent harm or injury (to the student or others) can override confidentiality.**

One suggestion from the counselling services was to call the local hospital if I thought the student was in danger of suicide. I am not qualified to make that assessment. ... I was left with a feeling of complete helplessness ... nobody seemed to know what to do.

(PhD Supervisor)

Maintaining confidentiality means protecting sensitive health information (personal or otherwise), and protecting the availability of that information to other people. You will not breach confidentiality if you:

- Consult with relevant support services (e.g., an academic service) about a student's circumstances (e.g., their academic performance and needs) with that student's permission;
- Consult with a relevant service without disclosing information that might make the student identifiable (e.g., contact details, name, location, gender, unusual details about the circumstances);
- Discuss with a relevant service general supports offered by that service without including the student's information.

You will breach confidentiality if you:

- Discuss a student's personal information or circumstances with a relative or work colleague, without that student's permission;
- Discuss a student's personal information or circumstances with a relevant support service, without that student's permission.

SUMMARY:

- It is not an academic teacher's role to directly counsel distressed students or support students to manage emotional or psychological difficulties. However, teachers have the responsibility to support learning, and help students find strategies to manage the effects of mental health difficulties on their academic studies.
- The confidentiality of any sensitive information that a student discloses to you should be maintained.
- Confidentiality can be over-ridden by your duty of care to prevent harm (to the student or others).

4.2 RESPONDING TO DISTRESSED STUDENTS

Current research indicates that around one in five students is likely to experience high levels of psychological distress during their time at university. Some of these students may be noticeably distressed in class; some may communicate with you in ways that raise concerns; some may repeatedly miss scheduled contacts and activities. Some students experiencing mental health difficulties may approach you directly for advice and support, and some may disclose personal difficulties they are facing.

These conversations can be difficult. You may not be comfortable with the student's display of emotion – which may take the form of tears and despair, or of false bravado, demands and aggression. The content of students' disclosures can also be distressing – including accounts of sexual or domestic violence, experiences of conflict, trauma or loss, suicidal thoughts and overly-harsh self-criticism.

WHAT IS HELPFUL TO SAY IN THESE SITUATIONS, AND WHAT IS NOT?

While there is no single best approach for responding to distressed students, there are some broad principles that can be used to guide practice. Below are some “dos and don'ts” offered by experienced counsellors from several universities (University of NSW, The University of Melbourne, La Trobe University).

DO

- If possible, choose a time and place that affords privacy and limited interruptions for your conversation
- Try to listen attentively and patiently – it may be difficult for the student to find the right words to explain their situation; sit with the silence
- Try to speak respectfully and take the student's feelings seriously (“I can see that it is very upsetting for you”, “It's very understandable that you would feel that way”)
- Ask what help they would prefer and support the student's agency (“Would you like me to call someone for you?” rather than “I'll call the Counselling Service now and book you in”)
- Suggest options, encourage them to seek appropriate support – gently (“It sounds like it might be helpful for you to talk with someone about this; what do you think?”, rather than “You need to see a psychiatrist or counsellor”).

DON'T

- Promise in advance to keep the information secret as you will need to breach confidentiality if you believe the student or someone else is at risk of harm

Having a post-graduate student tell me they attempted suicide over the weekend was way out of my comfort zone. It was not clear who I should call or what my responsibilities are. My immediate response was to give her a hug and have her come to dinner at my house. I was advised by the counselling service not to do that, even though it goes against intrinsic human nature.

(PhD Supervisor)

It is generally not your role to counsel distressed students or support students to manage emotional or psychological difficulties.

- Analyse the student's motives ("you only feel that way because..."; "Why are you coming to me with this just as the assignment is due?")
- Argue, lecture, ridicule or minimise their experiences ("you wouldn't be in this position if you had..."; "I think you're over-reacting")
- Ask questions that might imply judgement or blame – ("Have you done anything about this yet?", "Why didn't you tell someone before now?")
- Share your own experiences of being highly anxious or overwhelmed, or your own experiences of assault/abuse/trauma/grief/loss
- Attempt to physically console or comfort a student by hugging them or holding their hand.

REMEMBER

- The student needs to be motivated and ready to accept help – this cannot be rushed or forced
- The student may have very good reasons (that you are not aware of) for deferring or declining formal support
- Be clear about your role (what you can offer, what you cannot offer, what is appropriate; "I can help you work out a plan to catch up on the course work if you need to take some time off over the next couple of weeks, but I'm not the best person to help you manage the feelings/demands/events you are dealing with at the moment. Let's talk about who might be able to help you with that...")

SUMMARY:

- There is no single best approach for responding to distressed students.
- Remember your role as an academic teacher and be clear about what support you can and cannot offer.
- Do try to suggest options and encourage students to seek appropriate support.



4.3 WHO HAS YOUR BACK?

It is important to know from day one in an academic position when to seek advice and assistance from others about how to handle a situation involving a distressed student, and who is best placed to provide that advice or assistance.

In order to assist a student who may be experiencing mental health difficulties it is wise to consult with colleagues or mental health professionals IF:

- The situation is unclear or you don't know the student well enough to assess their behaviour
- You do not know what to do or what options are available to the student
- You want to talk through how you are managing a situation
- You believe the student is at immediate risk
- You believe there is an imminent risk of harm to others
- You feel overwhelmed or out of your depth
- You feel sad or cannot stop thinking about the personal circumstances of the student
- You think you would find it helpful to do so.

Within your department, faculty or school, you will have a formal 'line manager' – possibly the Deputy Dean – who will be familiar with the relevant policies, procedures and practices. Departments differ in their official processes for responding to distressed students. They might have a specific hotline for academic teachers to use, or a specific person who is nominated to be available to answer academics' queries. Ask your Head of Department about the processes in your department and who you can contact when you need advice or assistance in relation to a student who may be experiencing mental health difficulties.

It is also important to build your own support network for advice and debriefing when you are engaging with a distressed student. Experienced academic colleagues are likely to be your best source of such advice and support – they do not need to be in your department or even at the same university. Some other potential suggestions for people who might offer useful support include professionals in student advisory services as well as disability liaison or university counselling and health services.

If you need to debrief following a difficult conversation with a student, or seek advice on how to manage a student's behaviour, or refer a student for professional assistance, your university counselling service is an important resource. Some universities support staff through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which includes externally provided counselling support. The EAP is usually accessed through Human Resources and is confidential and free to the staff member.

SUMMARY:

- You should be aware of when to seek advice and assistance from others about how to handle a situation involving a distressed student, and who is best placed to provide that advice or assistance.
- There are a number of circumstances in which it can be wise to consult with colleagues or mental health professionals about a student who may be experiencing mental health difficulties.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: EXAMPLES AND RESOURCES

There are some excellent resources and programs designed to help students who are distressed. Some have been developed with students in mind, others have been developed for teachers or friends who have concerns.

Several Australian university Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) programs have developed specific resources to advise their academic teaching staff about how best to respond to students in distress.

Links to a range of these resources are available at:

unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/difficult-conversations/examples



5 YOUR WELLBEING

How are you managing your own wellbeing? Like university students, many academics face increased stressors and reduced resources in the contemporary higher education environment. Ever wondered how some of your colleagues stay on top of increasing demands without getting exhausted or cynical?

This chapter offers practical strategies, advice and resources from experienced educators and counsellors to help you maintain good mental health and a positive outlook at work.

5.1 MANAGING JOB DEMANDS

The roles of, and expectations on, academic educators have expanded and intensified in recent years. As noted in Chapter 1, student numbers and class sizes have increased substantially in many universities, and this increases the psychological demands on academic teachers as well as students. In addition, institutional expectations of academics' research 'productivity' and impact – through grants, publications and collaborations – have also risen. Much university teaching is undertaken by an increasingly casualised workforce of early-career academics who are also under pressure to publish in order to secure an ongoing position. For educators in a range of roles, the high levels of student psychological distress is another factor extending or intensifying academic job demands.

Managing the various demands of an academic job is an important skill for all academic educators – a skill that can be intentionally developed.

Most universities offer a suite of professional development programs and resources designed to assist academic educators with the demands of their jobs. Examples include programs and resources on teaching and facilitating learning, supervising research students, applying for research grants and engaging with industry and communities. Universities also offer programs and resources to support staff mental health and wellbeing. It is worth becoming familiar with these professional development resources **before** you are experiencing difficulties or feeling overwhelmed.

It is also critical to intentionally build your support network in academia. People are better able to cope with job pressures and demands if they have people on hand to advise and support them. While considerable autonomy is one benefit of an academic job, it also means that academic staff often lack an institutional support structure or close-knit team of colleagues. Finding professional mentors and colleagues who can provide social support – debriefing and venting, advising and consoling, encouraging and inspiring – is important to maintaining good mental health in an academic job.

The following more specific tips for maintaining your wellbeing have been identified through interviews with experienced academics and psychologists.

5.2 MAINTAINING YOUR WELLBEING

How, and how well, you manage the demands of your job depends in part on your personal skills in managing time, boundaries, self-expectations, and roles and role-conflicts.

TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Time and time use

- Email consumes time. Limit the number of times per day that you check email and limit the time that you spend responding. If possible, check and reply to email in times of the day that are less productive for you (e.g. AFTER writing or thinking). If it would take less time to speak directly to the person (face to face, by phone or Skype) than to develop a carefully written response, then respond with a call.
- Plan time each day to think, reflect or regroup.

Boundaries

- Over the long term, it is essential for your mental wellbeing to maintain a private life as well as interests and hobbies outside of work. At a minimum, having other parts of your life working well ‘buffers’ any disappointments or setbacks in your professional life. Maintaining other relationships requires that you allocate them time and your full attention. Work should not always be your priority or take priority. Take holidays in which you do not check email or continue to complete work tasks (such as reviewing articles, Skyping in to meetings, updating course materials or writing).
- Creating boundaries around your work (or compartmentalising it) is also essential for good sleep. If you read for and think about work in bed or just before you try to sleep, you will become habituated to keeping your mind active during the night, making it difficult to ‘turn-off’ and get the rest you need to recover.

Roles and role-conflicts

- Teaching, research and service – the three components of most academic roles – do not always complement and energise each other. It may be that you are assigned to teach subjects outside your area of expertise, taking extra preparation time, or a heavy teaching load may coincide with delivery dates for a large research project. It can help to recognise that when one of your roles becomes extra-demanding, the others need to be scaled back to compensate. Keep communications open with your manager or Dean and actively negotiate how your

overall work load can be kept within manageable bounds. For example, it may be more efficient for you to concentrate your teaching in one semester and then concentrate on research in the other; or increase your service load at a time of the year that doesn't coincide with heavy assessment or research commitments.

Self-expectations

- Academics are by definition high-ability people who are used to setting and achieving high standards for their work. While setting challenging goals is generally a positive strategy that motivates and energises people, it is essential that you are able to recognise when goals need to be modified and take steps to redesign your goals and re-orient your efforts and energy accordingly.
- It is also important to be kind to yourself when you experience setbacks and disappointments, difficult life events and adverse circumstances. These are simply part of life, meaning that there will be times in an academic career when you are not in a position to do your best work – only the best that you can, given the circumstances. At such times, try to speak to yourself as you would to a close friend in the same circumstances, and not to expect more from yourself than you would from others.

5.3 FAQs WITH AN ACADEMIC WORK COACH

Jenny English is a registered psychologist with over 25 years experience working in university counselling services. She currently provides supervision to professionals and managers across the health, welfare and education sectors.

1 What are the most important psychological skills that academics need to thrive in the role?

- **Self-regulation:** To be able to set goals and stick to them, or to re-evaluate, and keep your eye on those goals.
- **Self-awareness:** to understand what your stress points are, and what energises and keeps you going.
- **Good boundaries:** Understanding what your role is and developing the skills to work within that role.
- **Good help-seeking skills:** knowing how to seek help when you feel you are moving outside the boundaries of your role.
- **Good work/life balance:** To know that work has a place in your life, and to also engage in other meaningful activities.
- **Resilience:** the ability to keep going and bounce back. This will grow out of the self-regulation, self-awareness, knowing the boundaries, and keeping yourself motivated.

This is a 24/7 type of job. It's not a job you finish at the end of the day and go home and think "well I'm done", it's there all the time in your mind.

Professor Helen Lee,
La Trobe University

See the full interview with Jenny English at:

<http://unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/your-wellbeing/faq/>

2 What advice would you offer to junior or casual academics who have the extra stress of job insecurity?

This can be a difficult situation. It is important to:

- **Think of the bigger picture:** Keep your eye on your goals and the bigger picture of your career.
- **Enjoy the present:** Find ways to enjoy the present role with all its opportunities.
- **Find a coach:** A coach or a mentor can help develop and guide your career.

3 What advice would you offer to mid- or later- career academics who may have lost energy and enthusiasm for their work?

It can help to:

- **Set goals:** look at what motivates you, what gives you purpose and meaning (re-align your goals, if appropriate).
- **Network:** Participate in new committees and working groups to bring new perspectives and new people into your life.
- **Exercise:** Doing exercise before work can help to manage motivation and energy levels throughout the day.
- **Conduct a life-style audit:** Consider your eating and sleeping habits. Look at how you have fun and do more of that.

4 What advice would you offer an academic staff member who reports experiencing symptoms that may indicate anxiety or depression?

Anxiety and depression are very different experiences with a range of symptoms. These can be difficult and distressing experiences, but they can also be overcome with appropriate support. Two important things to do are:

- **Speak to someone** – a friend, a mentor, or a professional, and ask for help.
- **Don't punish yourself** for feelings of anxiety or depression. Anxiety can be self-perpetuating, especially when people feel frustrated, confused, or guilty about their anxiety. Depression can also lead to self-defeating behaviour. It is important to recognise when you are having these experiences, and to be kind to yourself, rather than judging or scolding yourself.

YOUR WELLBEING RESOURCES AND EXAMPLES

Links to a range of useful tools and tips for wellbeing developed outside of the university context are available at unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/your-wellbeing/tools.



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