

A Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities

There is a strong and expanding evidence base indicating that university students are a 'very high risk population' for psychological distress and mental disorders, and that the prevalence and severity of mental health difficulties is growing across student populations¹. The research raises a pressing question for administrators and educators: Given that a substantial proportion of students will experience mental health difficulties during their time at university, how can universities ensure they provide supportive and 'health-promoting' environments?

This *Framework for Promoting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing* aims to assist institutions to develop a 'whole-of-university' approach. It identifies key **action areas** for promoting student mental health and wellbeing as well as institutional **enablers** for achieving those actions. For each action, the framework identifies priority activities and possible measures of progress that can be adapted for different university environments, acknowledging that individual institutional approaches will vary according to local contexts and priorities.

Health promoting actions

- 1 Foster engaging curricula and learning experiences
- 2 Cultivate supportive social, physical and digital environments
- 3 Strengthen community awareness and actions
- 4 Develop students' mental health knowledge and self-regulatory skills
- 5 Ensure access to effective services

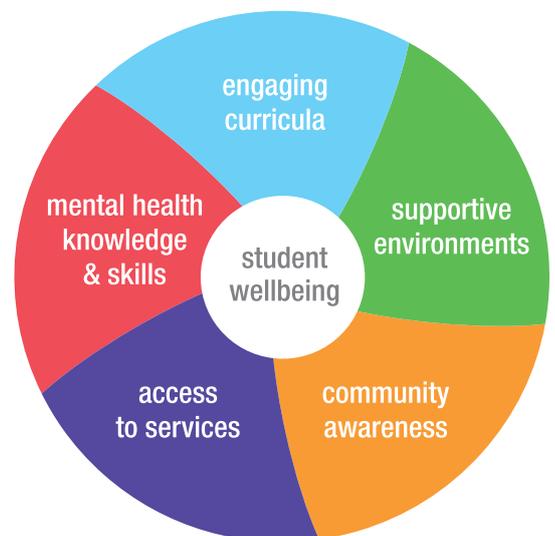
The five actions individually and together are important in developing a whole-of-institution approach to promoting student mental health and wellbeing. These actions will need to be supported by institutional arrangements that enable:

- 1 Policy development and review processes
- 2 Participation and empowerment of staff and students
- 3 Allocation of appropriate resources and recognition
- 4 Staff professional development

Approach

This Framework draws on three well-known blueprints for health promotion: *The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion*², *Healthy Universities³ in the UK*⁴ and *Mindmatters*⁵. It was developed through a process of feedback and consultation with higher education researchers, mental health experts, institutional leaders and academic and professional staff from 13 universities.

Figure 1 A Framework for Promoting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing



1 For example, Stallman, H. (2010); Larcombe et al., (2015); Wierenga, Landstedt and Wyn (2013)

2 The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion was signed in 1986 at the *World Health Organization's First Conference on Health Promotion* (see <http://www.who.int/healthpromotion/conferences/previous/ottawa/en/>).

3 A healthy university is defined as one that: 'aspires to create a learning environment and organizational culture that enhances the health, wellbeing and sustainability of its community and enables people to achieve their full potential' (Dooris, Cawoon, Doherty & Powell, 2010).

4 Healthy Universities is a framework developed in the UK for adopting a health settings approach within the higher education sector (see <http://www.healthyuniversities.ac.uk/>).

5 Mindmatters is a highly successful nation-wide initiative focused specifically on mental health in secondary schools (see www.mindmatters.edu.au).

ACTION AREA 1: Foster engaging curricula and learning experiences

Student mental health and wellbeing is supported when curricula and learning experiences afford choice and flexibility in approach, create social connections, build competence and foster intrinsic motivation.

Research indicates that student mental wellbeing is supported when curriculum and teaching practices foster students' intrinsic interests, and communicate the importance and value of the knowledge and skills being developed. Student mental wellbeing is also supported when curricula design and learning experiences build students' self-efficacy, afford choice and flexibility in approach, and create social connections – among students, and between students and academic teachers.

Engaging curricula and learning experiences are fostered when educators understand the needs of diverse students and adopt teaching practices that best support their learning.

Core activities (to undertake in the first year):

- 1 Auditing the curriculum to ensure flexibility in course-load and progression pathways
- 2 Reviewing assessment policies and practices to ensure that students receive regular, informative feedback on their learning and progress
- 3 Designing learning experiences that enable students to work together to achieve common goals

Additional activities may include:

- Revising course descriptions and statements of learning outcomes and skills to communicate to students the applications and social value of the knowledge and skills they are developing
- Regular curriculum mapping in light of diverse students' interests, capabilities and prior learning to ensure that learning is scaffolded and sequential and that tasks provide optimal challenge
- Promoting assessment design that affords students some flexibility in approach and meaningful opportunities to utilise strengths and explore emerging interests

Possible indicators of progress for institutional self-monitoring:

- Proportion of degree programs that offer flexible course loads and progression
- Student feedback on university surveys on the quality of feedback they received
- Proportion of students who report having had a positive experience working with their peers (in class or online) to complete learning tasks
- Proportion of students who report a sense of social connection with students and staff in their course (e.g. having made at least one or two friends within their cohort; being confident a staff member knows their name)
- Student feedback on university surveys on the extent to which subjects/courses stimulated their interest
- Student feedback on university surveys on the relevance and applicability of their course to their future

ACTION AREA 2: Cultivate supportive social, physical and digital environments

The social, physical and virtual environments for student life and academic engagement play a significant part in promoting or undermining student mental health and wellbeing.

Empirical studies have identified that social isolation from other students and a lack of a sense of belonging to an institution are strongly associated with mental health difficulties. It is essential to create social, physical and digital environments that are strongly inclusive, promote respectful interactions and relationships, and meet people's daily needs

Core activities (to undertake in the first year):

- 1 Providing cohesive, engaging extra-curricular activities that foster a sense of belonging for students from diverse backgrounds
- 2 Auditing and enhancing physical spaces to ensure access to appropriate spaces for private study, social interaction, and relaxation activities
- 3 Building partnerships with student societies and student groups at risk of isolation or discrimination – e.g. indigenous students; students with disabilities; international students; LGBTIQ students; and 'mature age' students

Additional activities may include:

- Auditing and enhancing student facilities to ensure access to: healthy food options and food preparation equipment; bicycle storage; and sporting facilities
- Engaging students in the co-creation of a 'code of conduct' on respectful communications and appropriate use of information and communication technologies in a university environment, underpinned by institutional values that promote inclusion and diversity
- Ensuring all students are aware of policies to address discrimination, bullying and harassment and of complaint processes for redressing offensive, intimidating or discriminatory behaviour

Possible indicators of progress for institutional self-monitoring:

- Proportion of students who report a sense of belonging to the university community
- Proportion of students participating in extra-curricular group activities
- Ratio of quiet spaces for private study, physical spaces for collaborative learning and social interaction, and facilities (e.g. food preparation equipment, bicycle storage) to (on-campus) student population
- Visible presence (e.g. office space, web presence) of student liaison officers for student equity groups – indigenous, LGBTIQ, mature age, students with disabilities, international students.
- Proportion of students who have actively engaged with resources (e.g. by completing online training module) on appropriate and respectful use of information and communication technologies
- Proportion of students who have actively engaged with resources (e.g. by completing online training module) on anti-discrimination policies and complaint processes for redressing offensive, intimidating or discriminatory behaviour
- Proportion of students using sporting and recreation facilities

ACTION AREA 3: Strengthen community awareness and actions

Mental health and wellbeing is supported when individuals within a community have the information and abilities needed to identify options and make decisions and choices conducive to good health.

As identified in the Ottawa Charter, health promotion works through empowering affected communities to take ownership and exercise agency in setting priorities, making decisions, and planning and implementing strategies to achieve better health (WHO 1986). For universities committed to better supporting student mental health, this means actively building the capacity of, and creating opportunities for, students and student organisations to effectively initiate, develop, contribute to and sustain activity and decision-making related to student life in general and student mental health and wellbeing in particular.

Resources, programs and activities that strengthen awareness of mental health among all members of the university community will help to support student mental wellbeing.

Core activities (to undertake in the first year):

- 1** Running regular campaigns to raise awareness of mental health and wellbeing and redress stigma associated with mental health difficulties
- 2** Developing or reviewing online and print resources that promote mental health literacy among students and staff
- 3** Facilitating student involvement in activities and programs to raise students' awareness of mental health issues and the academic benefits of mental wellbeing

Additional activities may include:

- Involving students in developing and delivering wellbeing activities at key points during the academic calendar such as orientation, interim assessment, swot vac and exams
- Organising, funding and promoting mental health training for student leaders involved in peer support programs
- Involving students in data collection and evaluation of wellbeing programs and activities

Possible indicators of progress for institutional self-monitoring:

- Number of, and student participation in, activities and campaigns related to mental health and wellbeing
- Number of, and participation in, student-led activities related to university life in general, as well as student mental wellbeing
- Proportion of faculty/department committees with student participation and representation
- Number of, and participation in, mental health training programs for student leaders
- Proportion of staff participating in professional development programs related to student mental health and wellbeing

ACTION AREA 4: Develop students' mental health knowledge and self-regulatory skills

All students should have opportunities to develop mental health knowledge and skills within their academic course of study.

While many students thrive at university, it is now known that a significant number experience mental health difficulties and struggle to manage the demands and pressures of their academic studies. These students need timely, personalised opportunities to develop relevant skills, such as time and task management, reflection and self-understanding, self-regulation, goal setting and help-seeking.

There is a growing body of research showing the benefits of integrating mental health skills education in the university curricula, in particular in helping students develop self-management skills, mindfulness and resilience (see Veness, 2016). These skills have also been linked to employability, and universities are increasingly including self-management and other skills related to wellbeing as learning outcomes in graduate attribute statements.

Core activities (to undertake in the first year):

- 1 Providing opportunities within the formal curriculum for students to learn health promoting knowledge and skills – such as resilience, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and time and task management
- 2 Developing curricula and co-curricular offerings that build students' self-knowledge (e.g. values and character strengths) so they are better able to make decisions and identify career pathways consistent with their values, interests and strengths
- 3 Developing print and online information and resources that build students' knowledge and skills for mental wellbeing (e.g. mental health essentials, stress-management, mindfulness, self-compassion, autonomous motivation, managing emotions)

Additional activities may include:

- Providing online tools and apps, customised to the local student experience and environment, that promote healthy behaviours, relationships, self-talk and goal-setting
- Collaborative development with students of programs, information and activities that build resilience and students' capacities to hear and act on constructive feedback
- Developing strategies for students with histories of abuse, discrimination or trauma to engage with potentially distressing curriculum materials

Possible indicators of progress for institutional self-monitoring:

- Proportion of subjects/units embedding health promoting knowledge and skills for mental wellbeing (e.g. building resilience, embedding mental health literacy, autonomy, self-management, employability competencies)
- Number of, and participation in, co-curricular programs/courses related to developing personal knowledge and self-regulatory skills (e.g. self-management, resilience, employability competencies)
- Availability (and take up) of online information and resources that build students' knowledge and skills for mental wellbeing
- Availability (and take up) of customised online tools and apps promoting mental wellbeing (e.g. healthy behaviours, relationships, and goal-setting)
- Availability and take-up of programs and information that build resilience and self-management.
- Availability of explicit guidelines/resources for academic staff teaching potentially distressing curriculum materials

ACTION AREA 5: Ensure access to effective services

Ensuring that students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties have access to appropriate services and academic adjustments requires not only that those services are in place but also that barriers to access (awareness and perception) are addressed.

Mental health difficulties and mental illness are surrounded by misunderstanding and stigma. This impacts the treatment of and responses to individuals who experience such difficulties; it also affects individuals' acknowledgement of mental health difficulties when they arise and decisions to seek help or access support.

Core activities (to undertake in the first year):

- 1 Ensuring diverse, visible and discreet student services to support wellbeing and learning (eg counselling, academic skills, careers)
- 2 Collecting data for evidence-based evaluation of the accessibility and quality of services
- 3 Fostering active student involvement in the development, review and evaluation of services

Additional activities may include:

- Auditing and developing appropriate print and online guides for accessing relevant school, university and community-based services – health and non-health – that are designed to assist students experiencing psychological distress (such as counselling, medical services, financial aid, childcare, chaplaincy, international student services, disability support, indigenous programs, LGBTIQ networks, academic skills, careers advice)
- Developing or reviewing strategies to ensure that students take up the available services
- Developing or reviewing guides for university staff on referring a student who may be experiencing mental health difficulties to relevant services

Possible indicators of progress:

- Number of, and participation in, diverse services to support wellbeing and personal development (e.g. counselling, academic skills, careers advice)
- Proportion of off-campus, part-time or distance students accessing services
- Feedback from students on the quality of services
- Average waiting times for services
- Ratio of the number of counsellors to the student population
- Proportion of students applying for special consideration related to mental wellbeing

The Four Institutional Enablers Checklist

1: Policies and processes

Institutionalise processes for development and review of mental health policies, and of targets and indicators related to student mental wellbeing within all aspects of institutional life, including responsible data collection and analysis so that policies and actions are based on accurate and appropriate information about students' needs, interests, circumstances and health.

- Is there an institutional mental health strategy?
 - *Are there critical incident management plans in place for the spectrum of mental health issues?*
- Are there discrete mental health policies at the faculty/school level?
- Is student mental wellbeing included within key student policies (e.g., special consideration, anti-discrimination, misconduct)?
- Are targets and indicators related to student mental wellbeing included in institutional teaching and learning planning and policy documents?
- Is student mental wellbeing included within the terms of reference of relevant university committees (e.g. those related to the student experience, teaching and learning, and student services)?
- Are there clear processes in place for the development and review of mental health policies, and of targets and indicators related to student mental wellbeing?
- Are there procedures for responsible data collection and analysis so that policies and actions are based on appropriate information about students' needs, circumstances and health?

2: People and partnerships

Ensure leadership and staff role responsibilities for student wellbeing and active student involvement in the co-creation of policies, programs and activities related to student mental health and wellbeing. Develop and support appropriate working groups, committees and service providers and form strategic partnerships with mental health professionals, services and advocates.

- Is there high profile leadership and advocacy in the university?
 - *Is the responsibility for student mental health and wellbeing explicit within senior executive roles (e.g., DVC, PVC)?*
- Is there a distributed model of responsibility for student wellbeing in all faculties/schools and student services?
 - *Are staff with responsibilities for student wellbeing readily identifiable at the school/program level (e.g. Program Directors, Associate Deans)?*
- Have partnerships been developed with mental health professionals and other health service providers in the university and the local community?
- Is there active student involvement in the co-creation of policies, programs and activities related to student mental health?
 - *Are there student-led activities and events to promote mental health and wellbeing?*
 - *Are there mental health training programs to support student leaders?*
- Are student organisations and groups encouraged and supported financially to run activities and events to promote student mental health and wellbeing?
- Are there partnerships with student societies and student groups at risk of isolation or discrimination (e.g. by appointing liaison officers for indigenous students; students with disabilities; international students; LGBTIQ students; and 'mature age' students)?

3: Resources and recognition

Allocate appropriate funding for student mental health promotion, and for support and recognition of academic work in enhancing student mental wellbeing – including development costs for curriculum innovation and teaching practices designed to support student mental wellbeing – through teaching workload formulas, program funding models, grants and award schemes.

- Is there specific resource allocation in university and faculty/school budgets for student mental health promotion?
- Are adequate resources allocated for academic work in supporting student mental wellbeing, including curriculum innovations and teaching practices designed to support student mental wellbeing (e.g. through program funding models and grants and award schemes)?
- Are funds allocated for staff to participate in professional development workshops, seminars and conferences related to student mental health?
- Is there recognition of academic work in supporting student mental wellbeing (e.g. in teaching workload formulas and through grants and award schemes)?
- Are there explicit provisions in HR and staff policies relating to mental health and wellbeing?

4: Staff professional development

Develop an institution-wide understanding of mental health and wellbeing through professional development in mental health 'essentials'. Provide additional professional development to academic educators in relation to curriculum and teaching practices that better support student wellbeing. Recognise staff 'mental health literacy' as an important element in supporting student mental health and wellbeing.

- Are there processes in place to monitor the workload of staff?
- Is there a range of programs for staff to develop health promoting knowledge and skills?
- Are there online and print resources for staff on ways to maintain their own mental health and wellbeing?
- Is there an explicit allocation of resources (space, funds) for services and programs specifically for staff wellbeing?
- Are there activities designed in collaboration with mental health experts, to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff?
- Are there activities and events to build relationships within the academic community (e.g. mentoring schemes)?

Project team

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