

“On the radar”: supporting university students’ mental wellbeing

Nicole Crawford, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University

Sherridan Emery, Peter Underwood Centre, University of Tasmania

Allen Baird, University of Tasmania

Gemma Burns, Peter Underwood Centre, University of Tasmania

Abstract

University students’ mental wellbeing is increasingly “on the radar” of universities in Australia and internationally. In this climate, this National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education study investigated university students’ perspectives of mental wellbeing and their insights into proactive approaches that they found supportive during their university studies. In particular, the research focused on mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas in Australia. The study followed a mixed-methods design. The research findings highlight the myriad and complex ways that students’ mental wellbeing is impacted by the many interactions between their multiple roles – at home, work, in their community and at university. Inclusive practices in teaching, learning and support were found to offer ways of catering for the needs and strengths of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia, and of proactively supporting and enhancing their mental wellbeing. The findings and guidelines will be shared in this presentation.

Proposal

Rationale

Taking a student-centred approach, this research investigated proactive approaches to support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students in, and from, regional and remote Australia. Significant issues underpin this focus, including the high levels of mental ill-health, which impact on students’ capacity to participate and succeed in higher education. Student mental health and wellbeing is increasingly a concern of universities, especially so when the connection is made between mental ill-health, poor engagement, and the resultant negative implications for retention, attrition, and academic performance. It has been reported that “health and stress” is the number one reason why students consider withdrawing from university (QILT, 2020), thus impacting not only on a student’s capacity to learn, but their ability to successfully participate in higher education. Momentum is gaining in Australia regarding high-level acknowledgement of health and wellbeing in university settings with recent reports and frameworks (Baik et al., 2016; Higher Education Standards Panel, 2018; Orygen, 2020), and international blueprints, highlighting the need for holistic and institution-wide approaches to wellbeing.

Regional and remote students are in the national spotlight, but attention is often paid to school leavers in national reports. In responding to calls for deeper understanding of the diversity and complexity of equity-group cohorts (Pollard, 2018), this research focused on the experiences of mature-aged students, a significant but lesser-known aspect, whilst acknowledging the diversity that exists within the regional and remote cohort.

Approach/method

The study investigated two over-arching research questions: i) “What factors impact on the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?”; and ii) “What are proactive approaches that support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?” The study followed a mixed-methods design. It was informed by multiple conceptualisations of mental wellbeing and drew on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to demonstrate that students are located within multiple interacting microsystems (e.g. university, family, work and local community). Three methods of data collection were undertaken: i) National higher education student data; ii) Student survey; and iii) Student interviews. The research findings informed a set of recommendations for universities and guidelines for staff. Participants will be invited to discuss the guidelines and consider how they could implement them in their institutions.

Questions for audience discussion

1. In your various roles, as academic and professional staff, what can you take away from these findings and guidelines, and implement “on the ground” in your context at your institution? What changes could you make in your teaching and learning, and support contexts? What are you already doing?
2. Considering a whole-of-institution approach, what strategies could your university implement to improve the experiences of equity-group and “equity-like” group cohorts, such as mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?

References

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