The Wicked Problem of University Student Mental Health

Inaugural Australasian Mental Health and Higher Education Conference
James Cook University, Townsville, 30 June 2017
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Our work in this area is important to at least four groups

- Students
- Our institutions
- Staff
- The public
Students are the primary stakeholder

- Students
- Our institutions
- Staff
- The public
Students have been pleading for more mental health support for many years
Data support students’ pleas: their age group suffers the highest burden of disease.

**Figure 4.12: The prevalence of mental disorders in the preceding 12 months, by age group and by disorder group, 2007**

Suicide is now the leading cause of death for 15 to 24-year-olds, far exceeding the road toll

Source: ABS, 3303.0 Causes of Death, Australia, 2015, Table 1.3 – note that these numbers are subject to revision
Staff are also an important stakeholder, in several ways

Students  |  Our institutions
---|---
Staff   |  The public
Our institutions’ success is tied to their students’ mental health
The public should also be concerned about students’ mental health

Students

Our institutions

Staff

The public
Mental health has been a population-level priority since at least 1996.
Mental health is a major public policy issue – not only in Australia, but globally

The Global Economic Burden of Non-communicable Diseases

A report by the World Economic Forum and the Harvard School of Public Health
September 2011
Our approach needs to consider three levels

- Institutional enablers
- Prevention
- Intervention
Queen’s University in Canada is one of the exemplars of a “tone from the top”

**Mental Health**

The principal is committed to ensuring that the university continues to be a proactive and responsive community that promotes every student’s success from the day they arrive through to graduation.

*Student mental health is a serious and growing issue at universities and colleges in Canada and around the world, including Queen’s... As a community, we must strive to be proactive in seeking to provide a teaching and learning environment that supports our students in all facets of their lives, including their mental health.*

*Principal Daniel Woolf*
More Australian universities need a “tone from the top” that supports student mental health

RMIT makes students’ mental health and wellbeing a core priority

RMIT exists to create transformative experiences for our students, getting them ready for life and work, and to help shape the world with research, innovation, teaching and engagement.

To help our students realise their enormous potential, RMIT is proud to announce its commitment to a three-year whole-of-University change project that recognises student mental health and wellbeing as a core institutional priority.

RMIT makes students’ mental health and wellbeing a core priority

RMIT’s Academic Board has endorsed RMIT’s adoption of the recently published Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities and has mapped its project plan against the recommendations in Churchill Fellow Dr Benjamin Veness’s report, The Wicked Problem of University Student Mental Health.

With this significant change project, RMIT will become one of the few universities in Australia to have a comprehensive student mental health strategy, and we aim to set the standard for the sector.

We will share our work with other institutions and with Universities Australia, and challenge all Australian universities to get serious about promoting student mental health and wellbeing as a core institutional priority.

Martin Bean
Vice-Chancellor and President
June 2017
Tertiary institutions have a special skill and role: research

Setting-based interventions to promote mental health at the university: a systematic review


Abstract

Objectives

Universities are dynamic environments. But university life presents challenges that may affect the mental health of its community. Higher education institutions provide opportunities to promote public health. Our objective is to summarize the current evidence on strategies to promote mental health at the university, following a setting-based model.

Methods

We conducted a systematic literature review following standard methods. Published literature that evaluated structural and organizational strategies to promote mental health at the university was selected.

Results

19 papers were included. The majority of the studies were targeting the students, with only four aiming to promote employees’ mental health. The most promising strategies to promote mental wellbeing included changes in the way students are taught and assessed. On the other hand, social marketing strategies had no impact on mental health. There is inconclusive evidence related to the effectiveness of policies to promote mental health.

Conclusions

Universities should invest in creating supportive physical, social and academic environments that promote student and staff mental wellbeing. However, the...
Each of us has an opportunity (obligation) to help effect change
In memoriam Dr Chloe Abbott
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Suicide deaths now far exceed the road toll (in total for all ages)

Source: ABS and Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics via ABC Fact Check
There has been significant growth in the post-secondary student cohort size

Source: Australian Government Department of Education and Training uCube
The vast majority of these students are undergraduates

Source: Australian Government Department of Education and Training uCube