

# 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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 **@venessb**

Our work in this area is important to at least four groups

Students

Our institutions

Staff

The public

# Students are the primary stakeholder

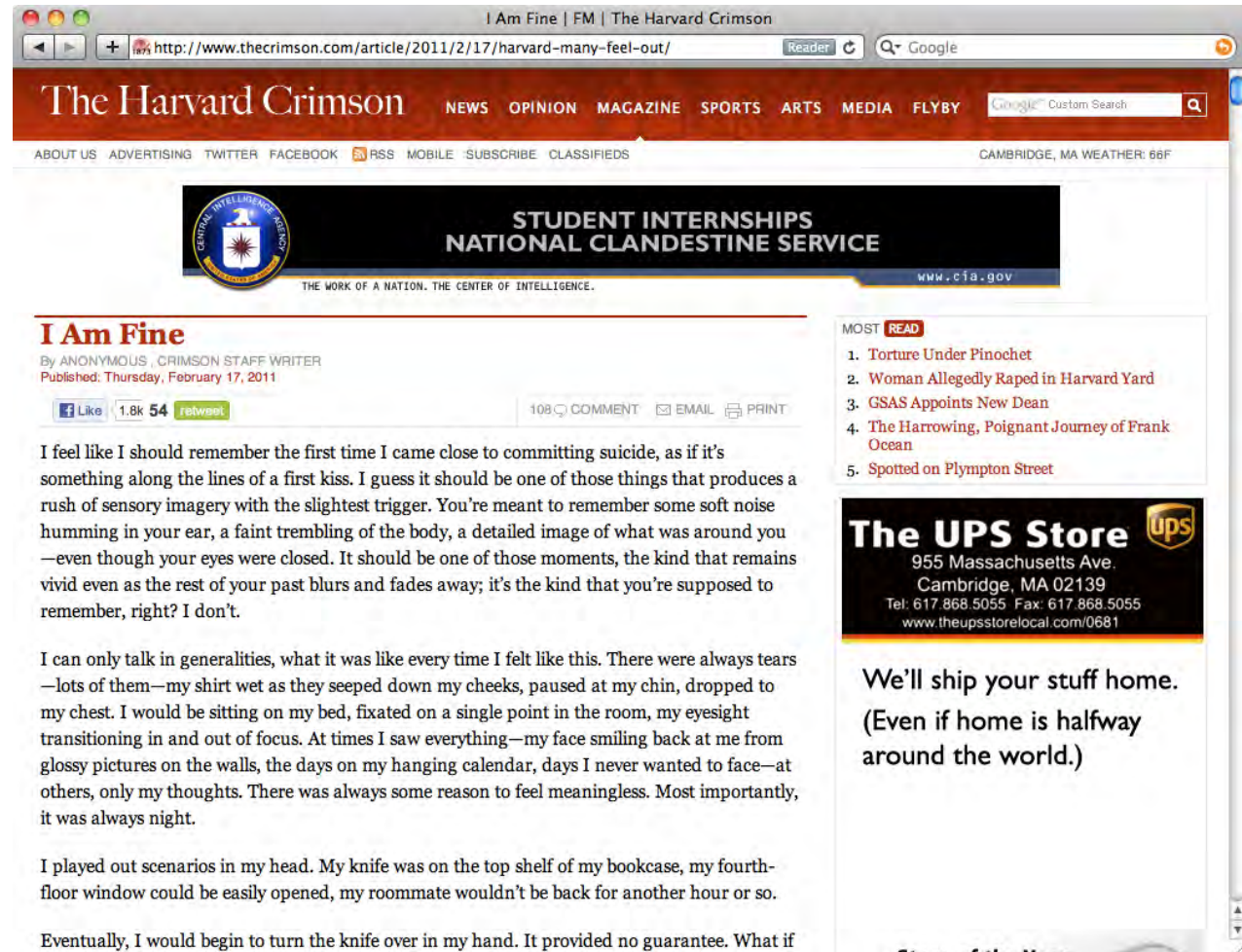
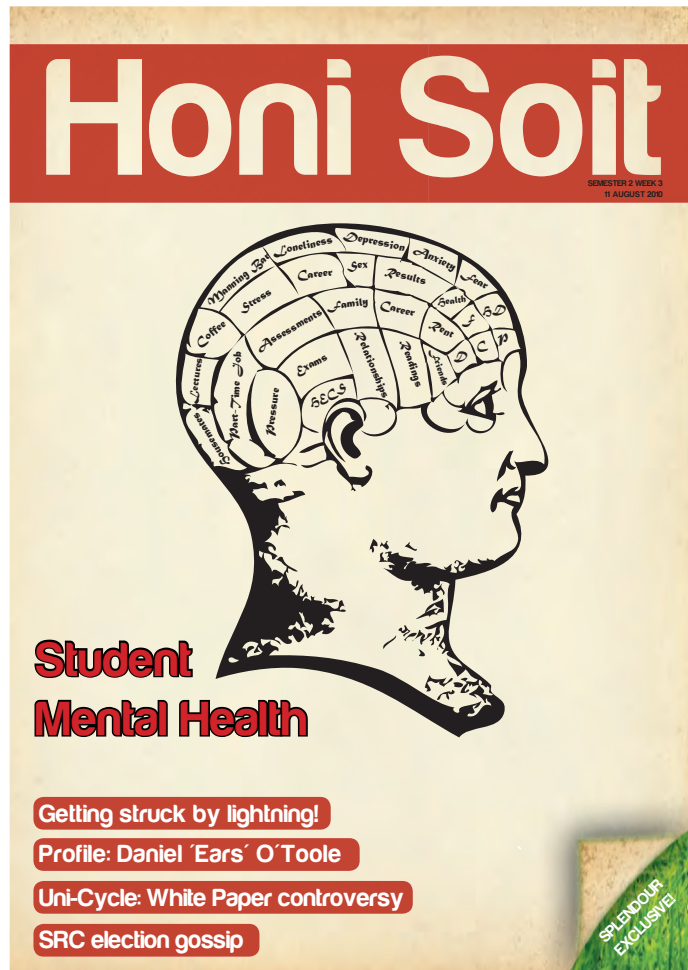
Students

Our institutions

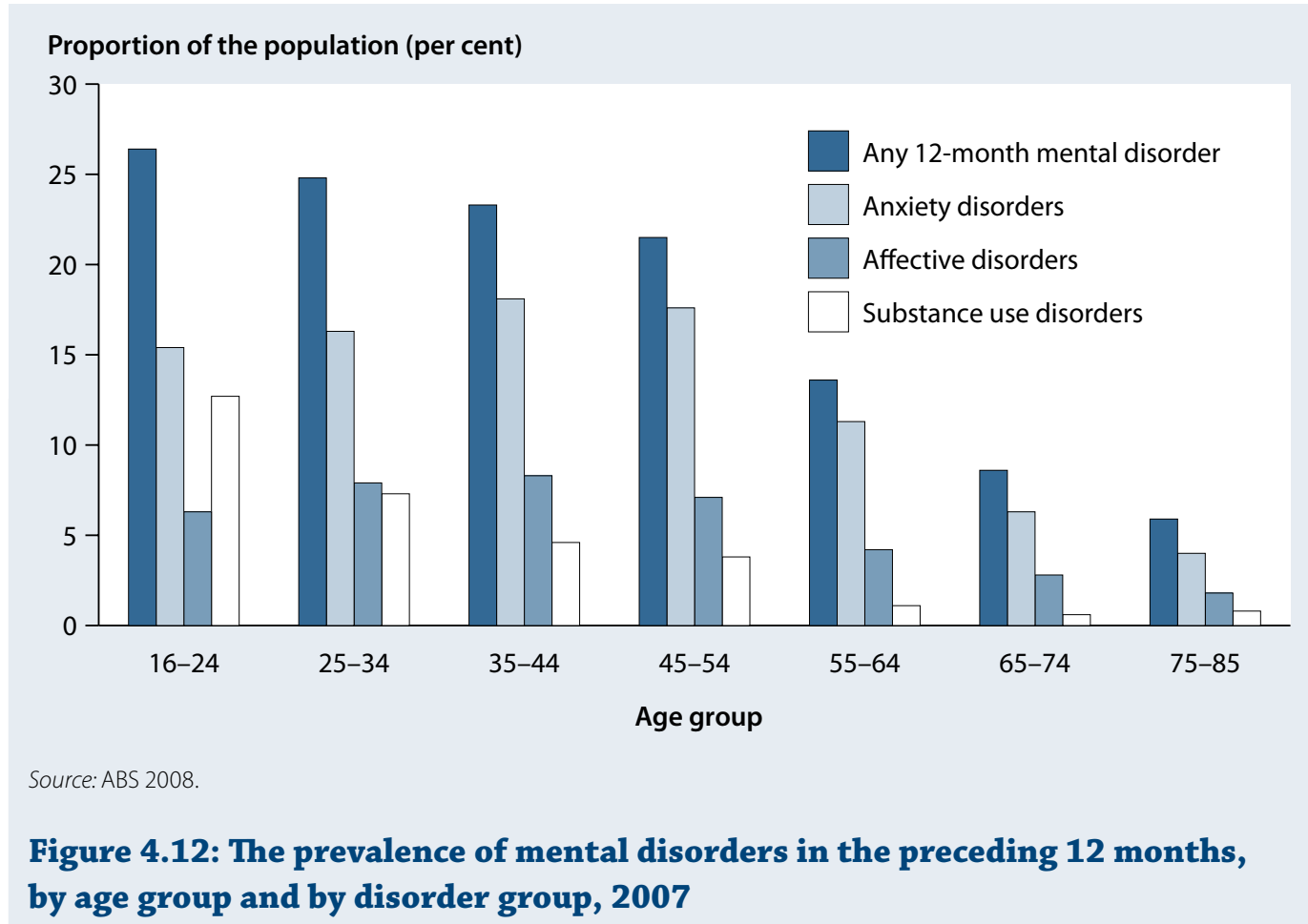
Staff

The public

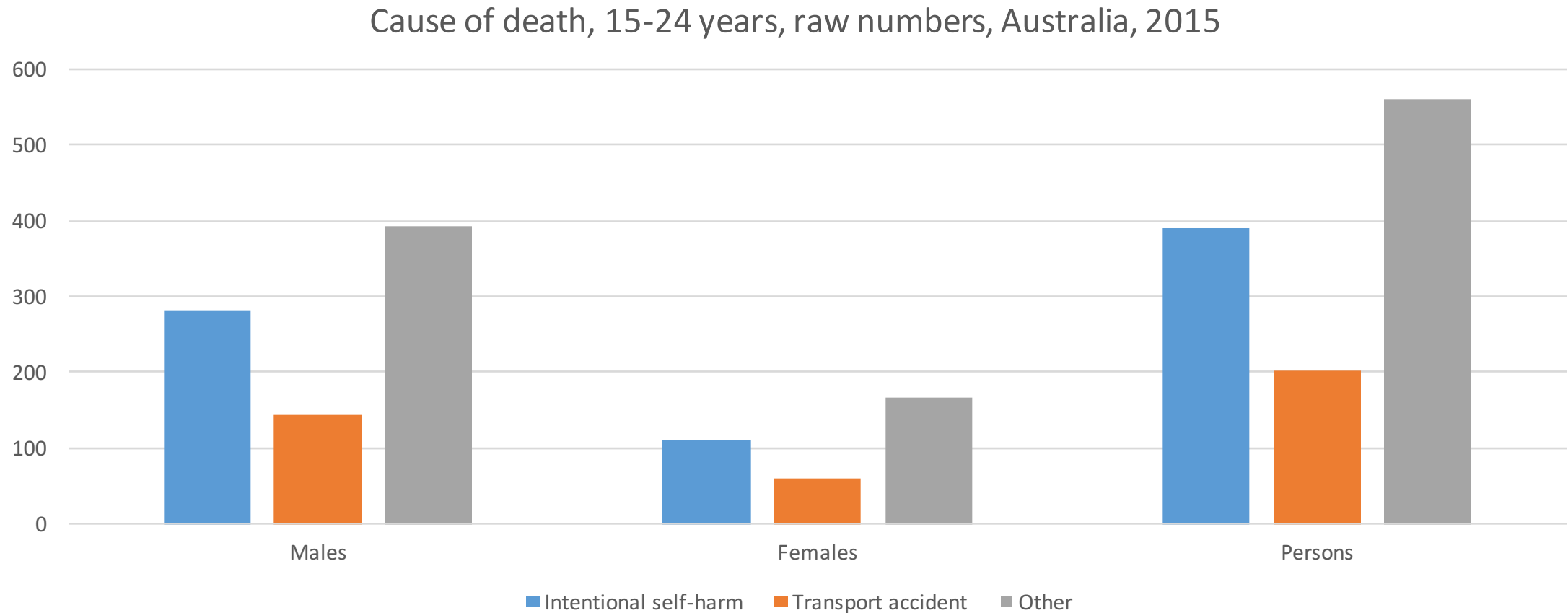
# Students have been pleading for more mental health support for many years



# Data support students' pleas: their age group suffers the highest burden of disease



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



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

Students

Our institutions

Staff

The public



The public should also be concerned about students' mental health

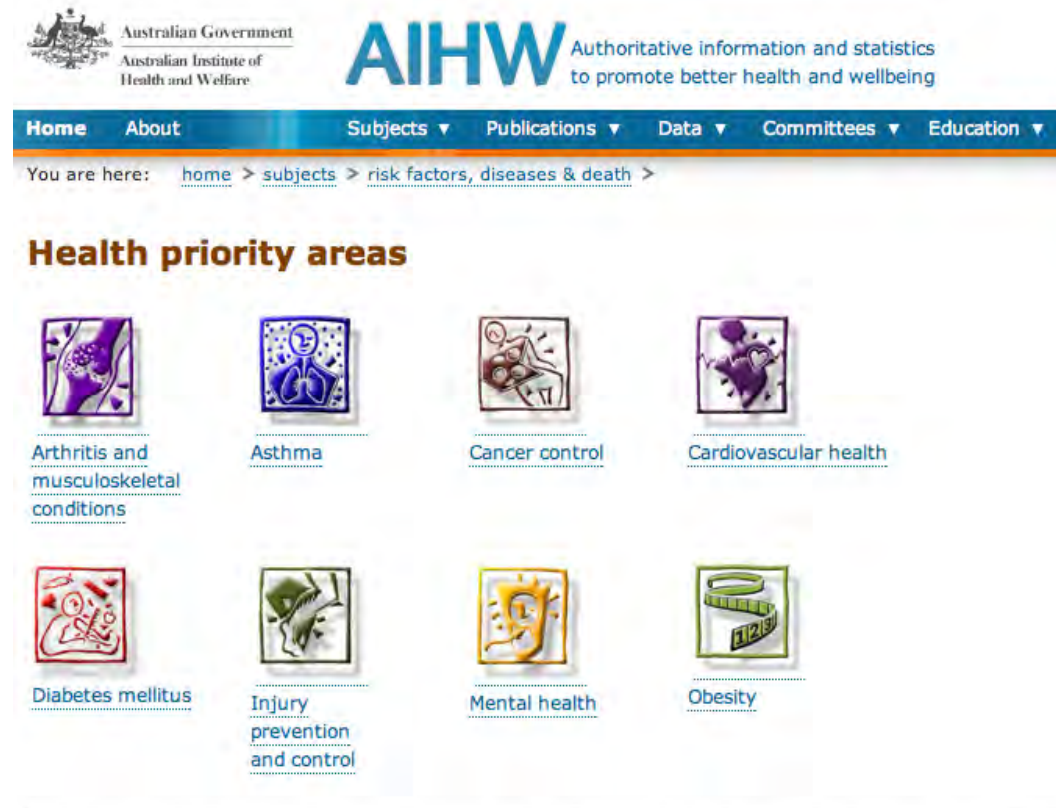
Students

Our institutions

Staff

The public

# Mental health has been a population-level priority since at least 1996



The National Health Priority Areas initiative was Australia's response to the World Health Organisation's global strategy *Health for All by the year 2000* and its subsequent revision.

The initial 1996 set of NHPAs included cardiovascular health, cancer control, injury prevention and control and mental health. Diabetes mellitus was added in 1997, followed by asthma in 1999, arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions in 2002 and obesity in 2008.

# Mental health is a major public policy issue – not only in Australia, but globally

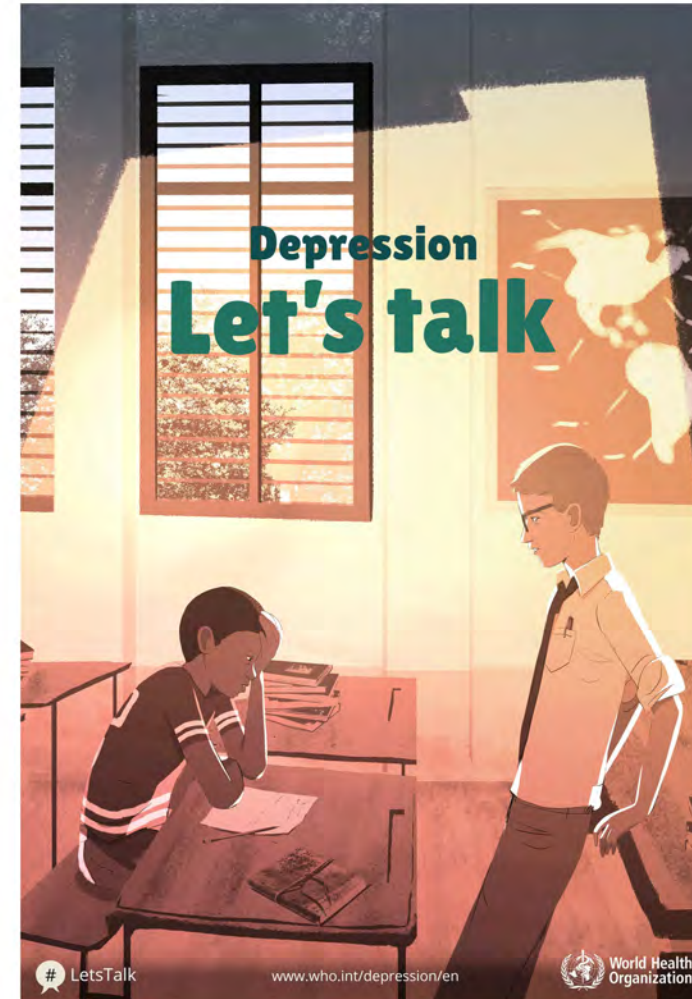


## The Global Economic Burden of Non-communicable Diseases

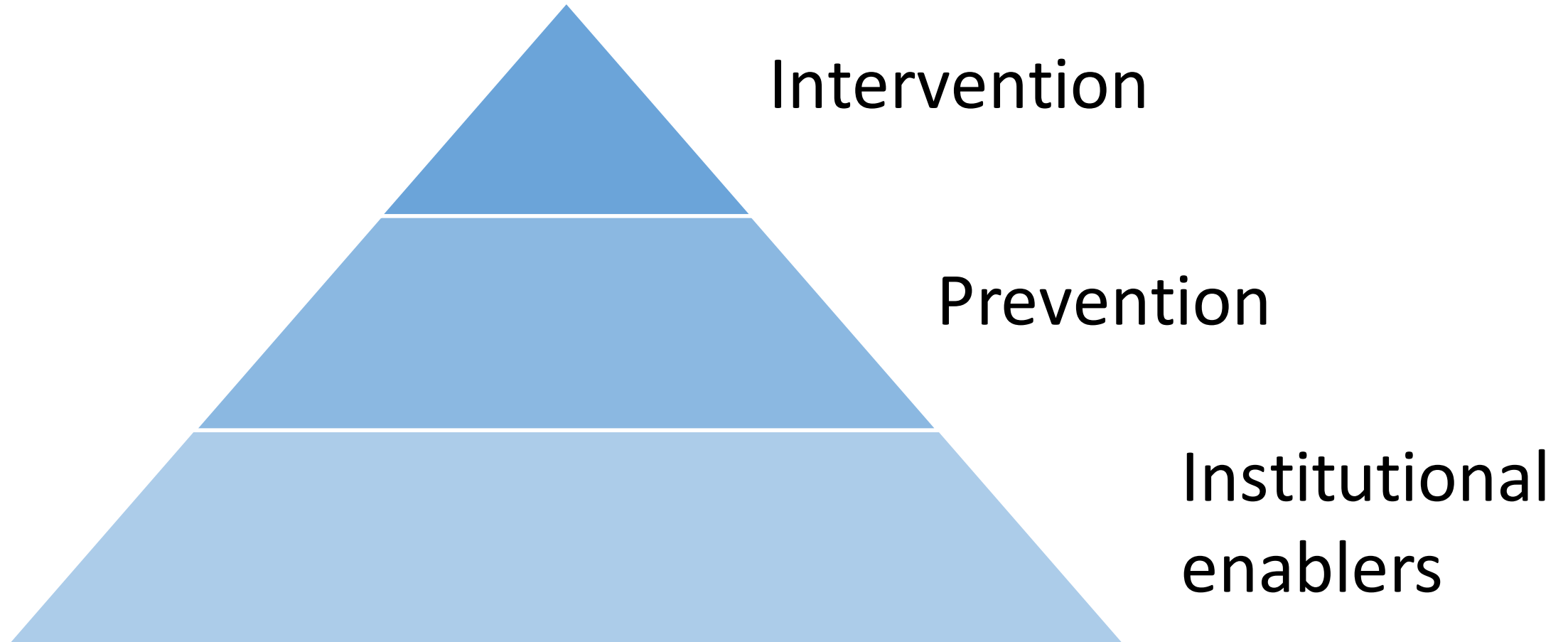


A report by the World Economic Forum  
and the Harvard School of Public Health

September 2011



Our approach needs to consider three levels



# Queen's University in Canada is one of the exemplars of a “tone from the top”

## **Mental Health**

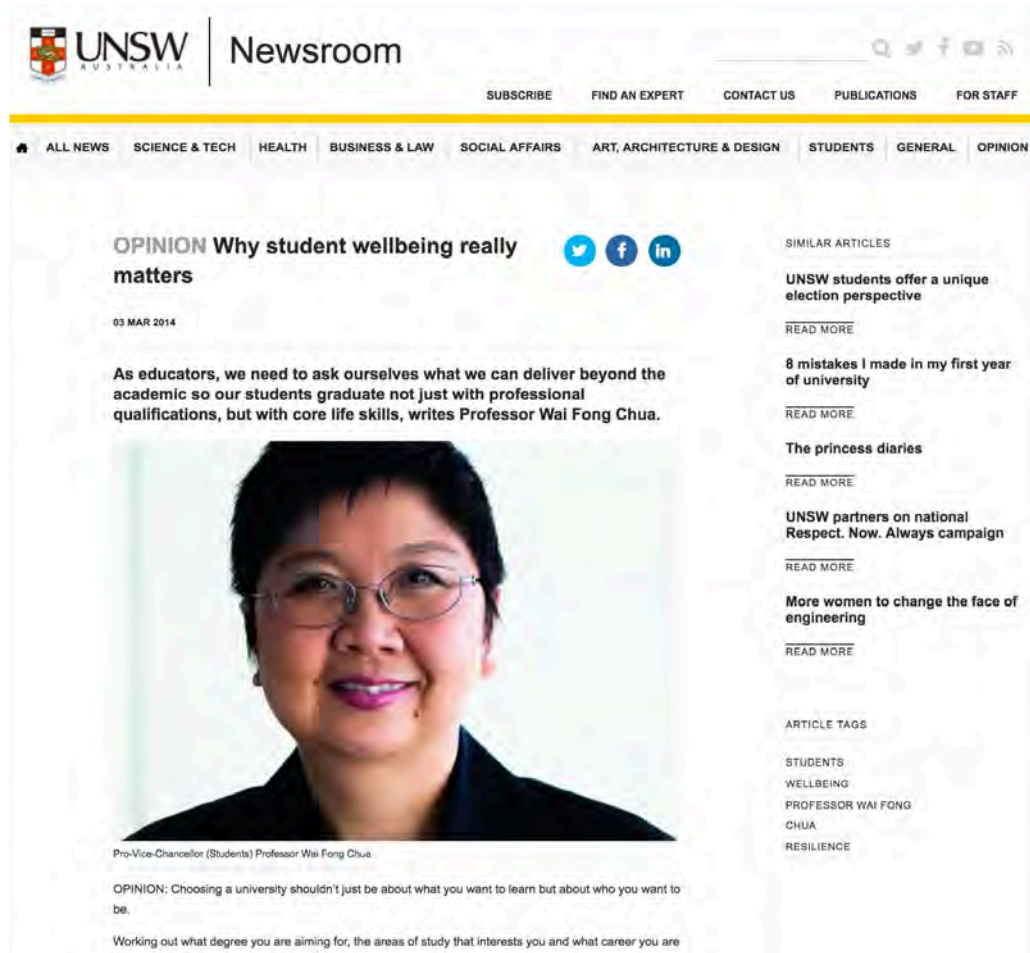
The principal is committed to ensuring that the university continues to be a proactive and responsive community that promotes every student's success from the day they arrive through to graduation.

*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.*

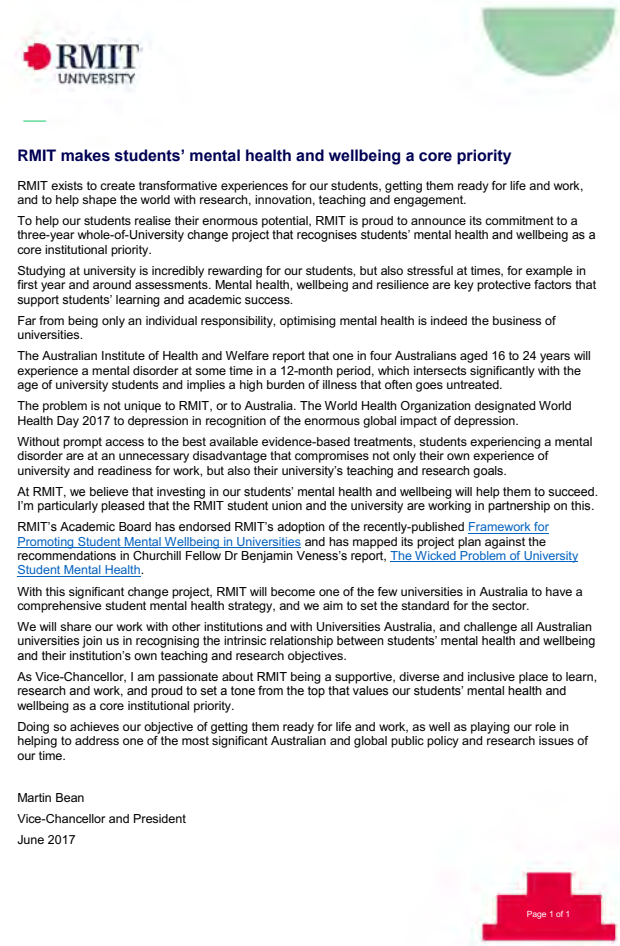
*Principal Daniel Woolf*



# More Australian universities need a “tone from the top” that supports student mental health



The screenshot shows the UNSW Newsroom website. The header includes the UNSW Australia logo and the word "Newsroom". Below the header is a navigation bar with links: SUBSCRIBE, FIND AN EXPERT, CONTACT US, PUBLICATIONS, and FOR STAFF. A secondary navigation bar lists various news categories: ALL NEWS, SCIENCE & TECH, HEALTH, BUSINESS & LAW, SOCIAL AFFAIRS, ART, ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN, STUDENTS, GENERAL, and OPINION. The main content area features an opinion article titled "OPINION Why student wellbeing really matters" dated 03 MAR 2014. The article text reads: "As educators, we need to ask ourselves what we can deliver beyond the academic so our students graduate not just with professional qualifications, but with core life skills, writes Professor Wai Fong Chua." Below the text is a portrait of Professor Wai Fong Chua, identified as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students). To the right of the article is a sidebar titled "SIMILAR ARTICLES" listing: "UNSW students offer a unique election perspective", "8 mistakes I made in my first year of university", "The princess diaries", and "UNSW partners on national Respect. Now. Always campaign". At the bottom of the sidebar is an "ARTICLE TAGS" section with labels: STUDENTS, WELLBEING, PROFESSOR WAI FONG CHUA, and RESILIENCE.



The screenshot shows the RMIT University website. The header includes the RMIT University logo. The main content area features a statement titled "RMIT makes students' mental health and wellbeing a core priority". The text reads: "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 students' mental health and wellbeing as a core institutional priority. Studying at university is incredibly rewarding for our students, but also stressful at times, for example in first year and around assessments. Mental health, wellbeing and resilience are key protective factors that support students' learning and academic success. Far from being only an individual responsibility, optimising mental health is indeed the business of universities. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report that one in four Australians aged 16 to 24 years will experience a mental disorder at some time in a 12-month period, which intersects significantly with the age of university students and implies a high burden of illness that often goes untreated. The problem is not unique to RMIT, or to Australia. The World Health Organization designated World Health Day 2017 to depression in recognition of the enormous global impact of depression. Without prompt access to the best available evidence-based treatments, students experiencing a mental disorder are at an unnecessary disadvantage that compromises not only their own experience of university and readiness for work, but also their university's teaching and research goals. At RMIT, we believe that investing in our students' mental health and wellbeing will help them to succeed. I'm particularly pleased that the RMIT student union and the university are working in partnership on this. 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 join us in recognising the intrinsic relationship between students' mental health and wellbeing and their institution's own teaching and research objectives. As Vice-Chancellor, I am passionate about RMIT being a supportive, diverse and inclusive place to learn, research and work, and proud to set a tone from the top that values our students' mental health and wellbeing as a core institutional priority. Doing so achieves our objective of getting them ready for life and work, as well as playing our role in helping to address one of the most significant Australian and global public policy and research issues of our time." The statement is signed by Martin Bean, Vice-Chancellor and President, dated June 2017. A red staircase graphic is visible in the bottom right corner.

# Tertiary institutions have a special skill and role: research

Int J Public Health  
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REVIEW



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

A. Fernandez · E. Howse · M. Rubio-Valera · K. Thorncraft · J. Noone · X. Luu · B. Veness · M. Leech · G. Llewellyn · L. Salvador-Carulla

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### 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 summarise 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 organizations 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 not 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

**Electronic supplementary material** The online version of this article (doi:10.1007/s00038-016-0846-4) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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# Each of us has an opportunity (?obligation) to help effect change



## 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 populations<sup>1</sup>. 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*<sup>2</sup>, *Healthy Universities<sup>3</sup> in the UK<sup>4</sup>* and *Mindmatters<sup>5</sup>*. 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.

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

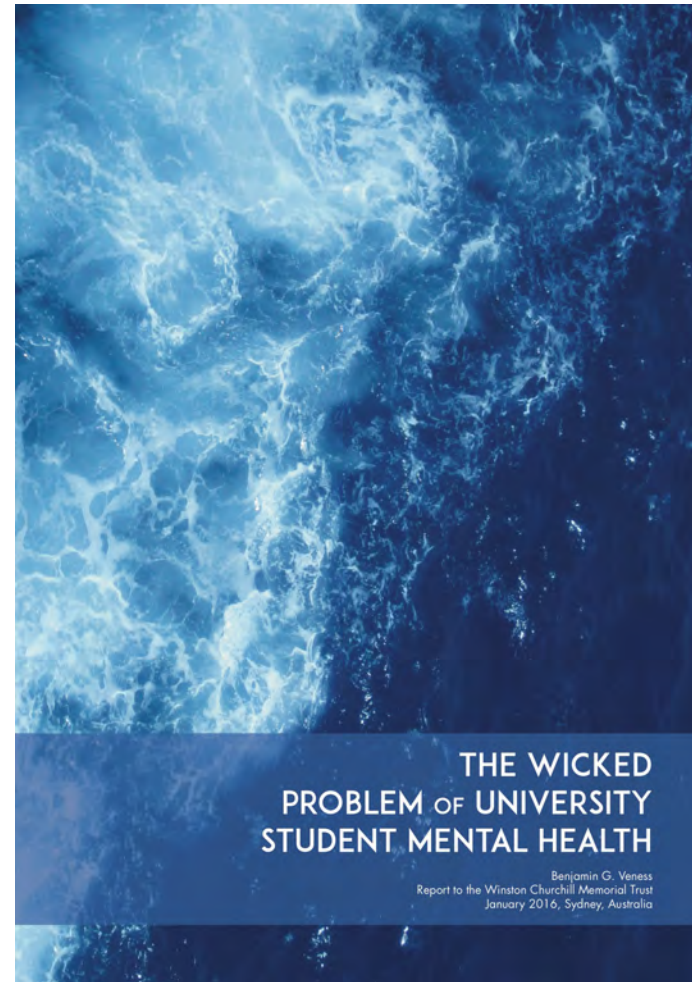
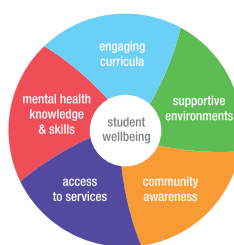
<sup>2</sup> The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion was signed in 1986 at the World Health Organization's First Conference on Health Promotion (see <http://www.who.int/healthpromotion/conferences/previous/ottawa/en/>).

<sup>3</sup> 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' (Doris, Cawson, Doherty & Powell, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> 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/>).

<sup>5</sup> Mindmatters is a highly successful nation-wide initiative focused specifically on mental health in secondary schools (see [www.mindmatters.edu.au/](http://www.mindmatters.edu.au/)).

Figure 1 A Framework for Promoting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

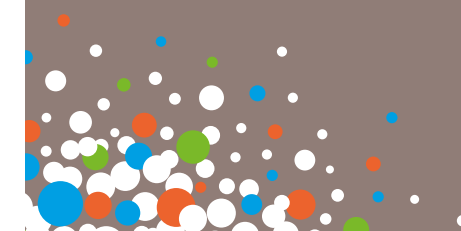


Orygen

The National Centre of Excellence  
in Youth Mental Health

### Under the radar

The mental health of Australian university students





# *In memoriam* Dr Chloe Abbott



# The Wicked Problem of University Student Mental Health

Inaugural Australasian Mental Health and Higher Education Conference

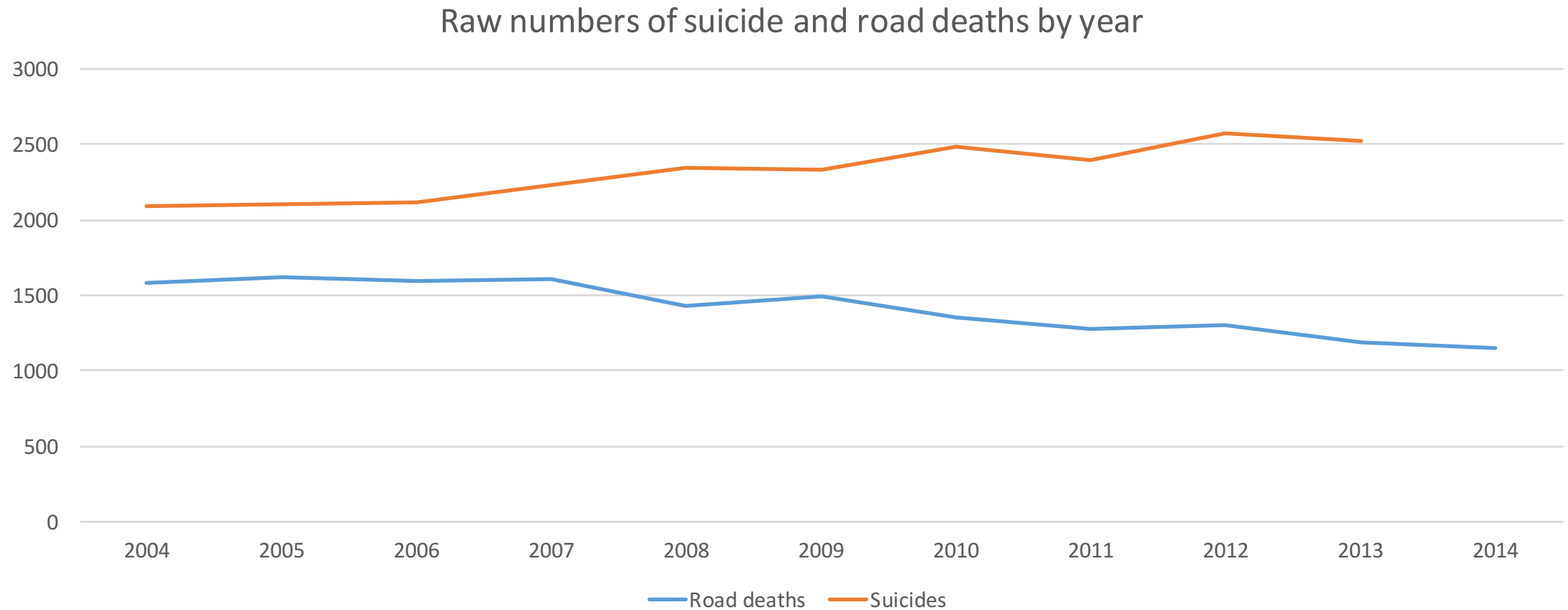
James Cook University, Townsville, 30 June 2017

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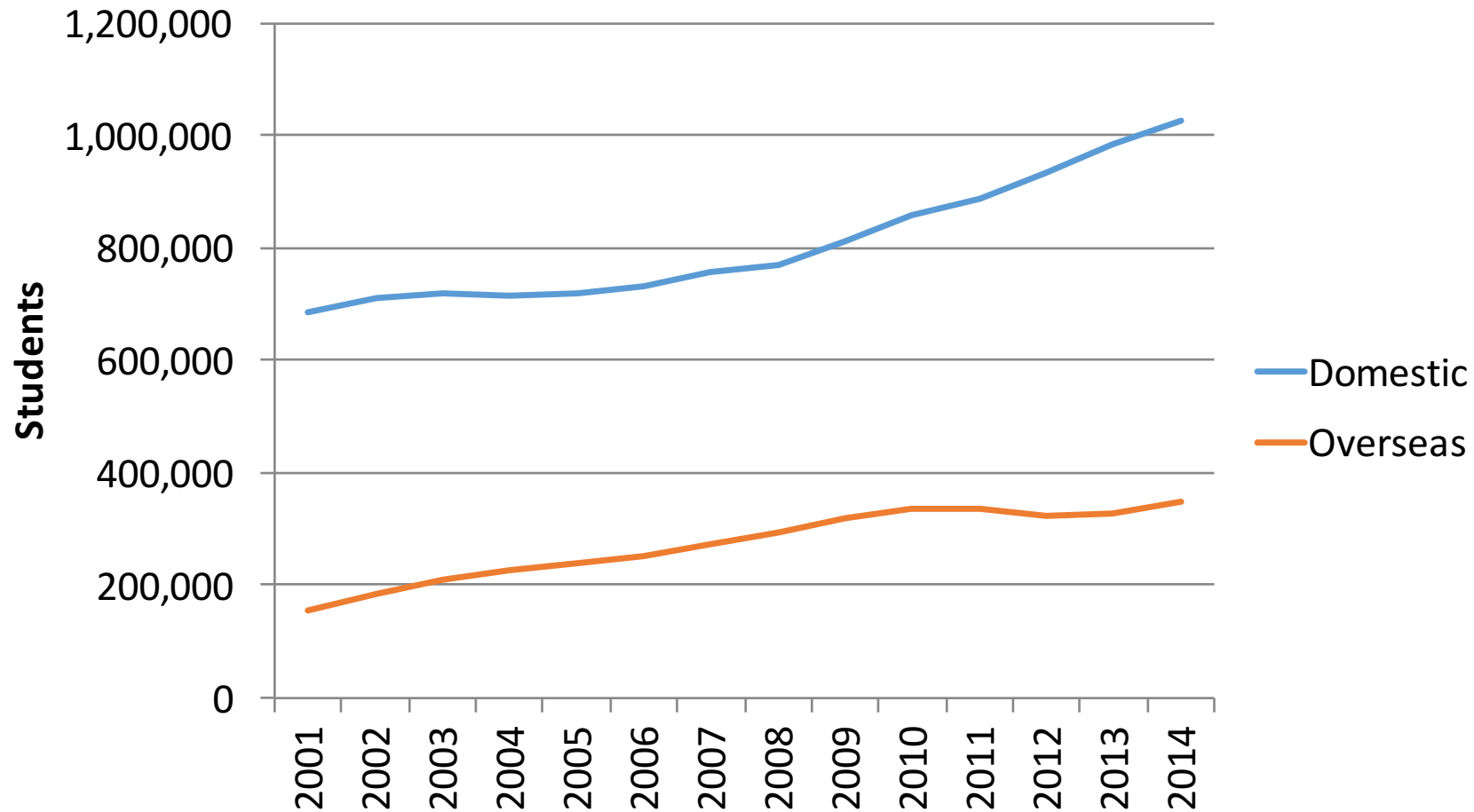
 **@venessb**

[www.benveness.com](http://www.benveness.com)

# Suicide deaths now far exceed the road toll (in total for all ages)



# There has been significant growth in the post-secondary student cohort size



# The vast majority of these students are undergraduates

