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
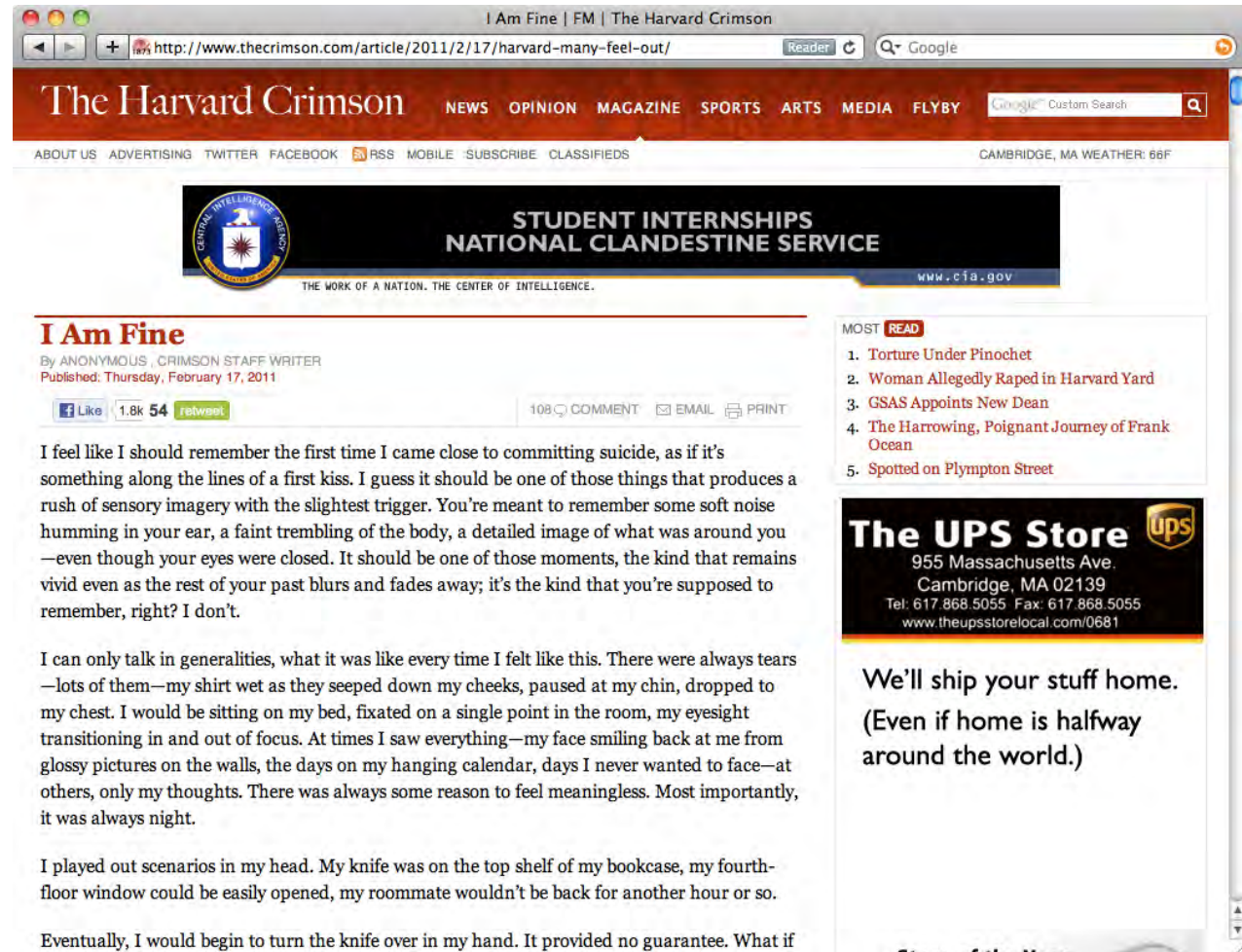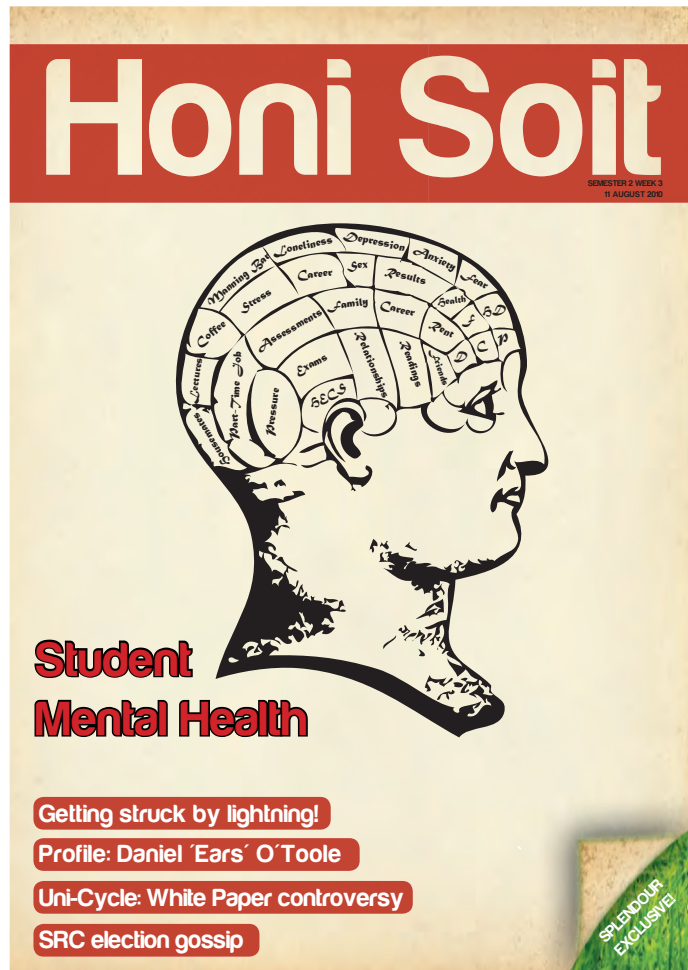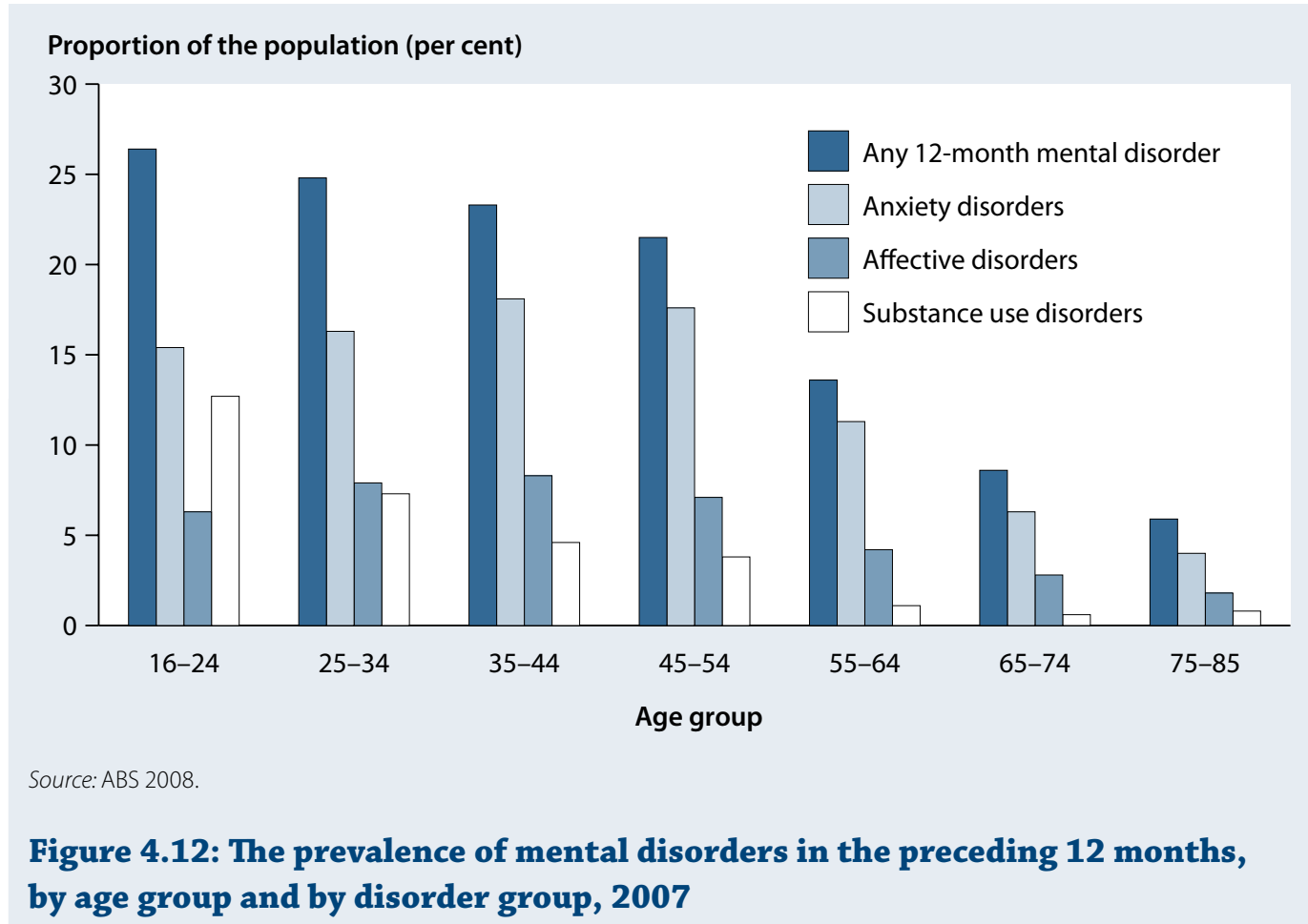
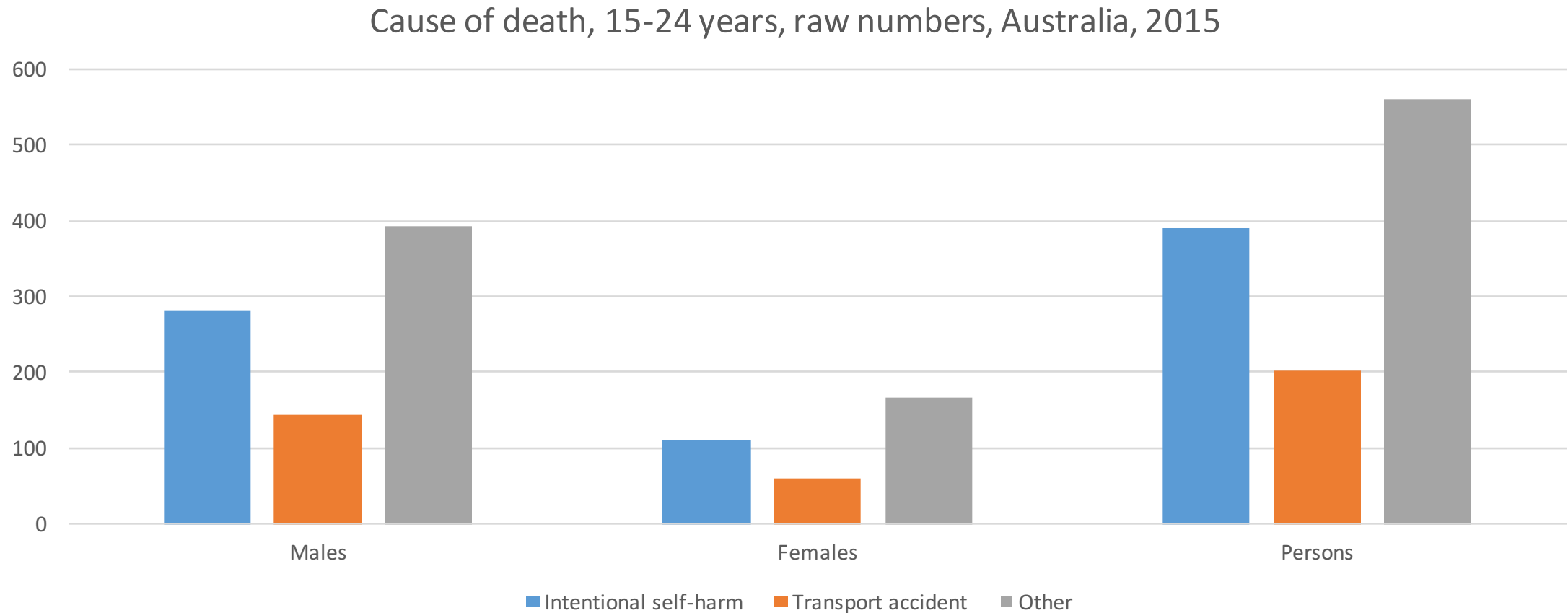|	
Students	Our institutions
Staff	The public

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

Proportion of the population (per cent)

Legend:
- Any 12-month mental disorder
- Anxiety disorders
- Affective disorders
- Substance use disorders

X-axis (Age group): 16–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, 65–74, 75–85

Source: ABS 2008.

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

Cause of death, 15-24 years, raw numbers, Australia, 2015

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

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
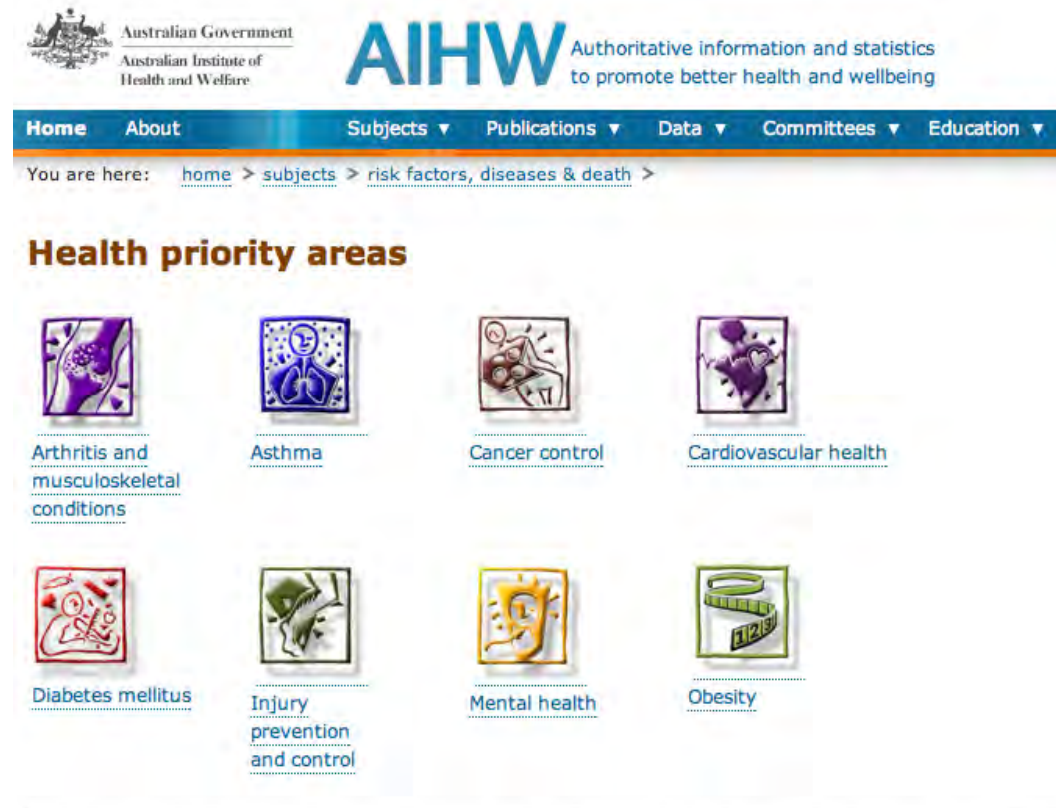
Mental health is a major public policy issue – not only in Australia, but globally
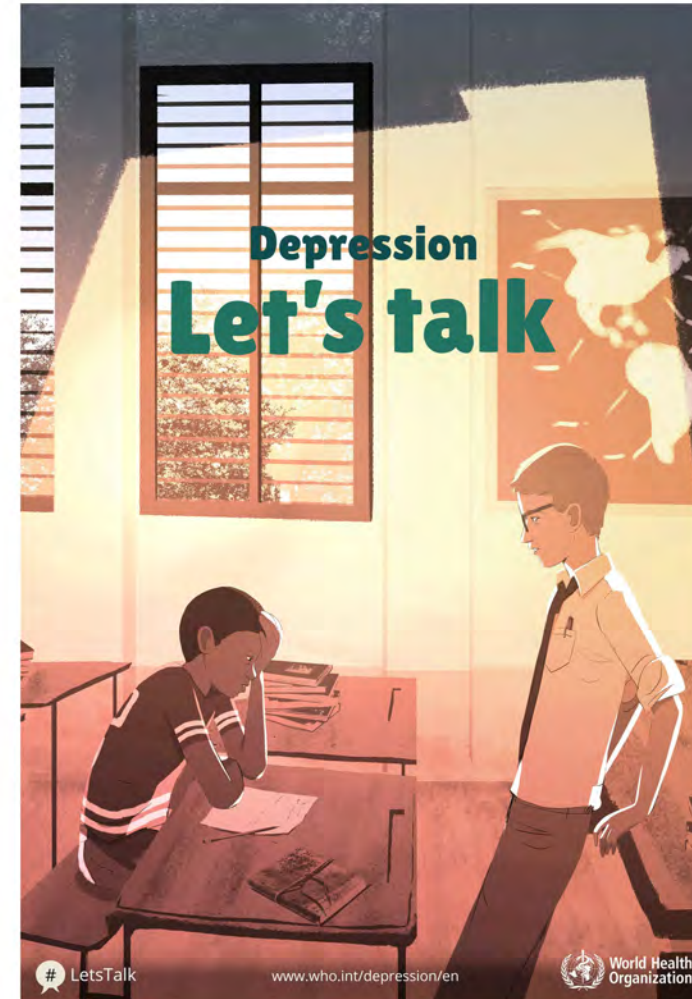
Our approach needs to consider three levels

Intervention

Prevention

Institutional enablers
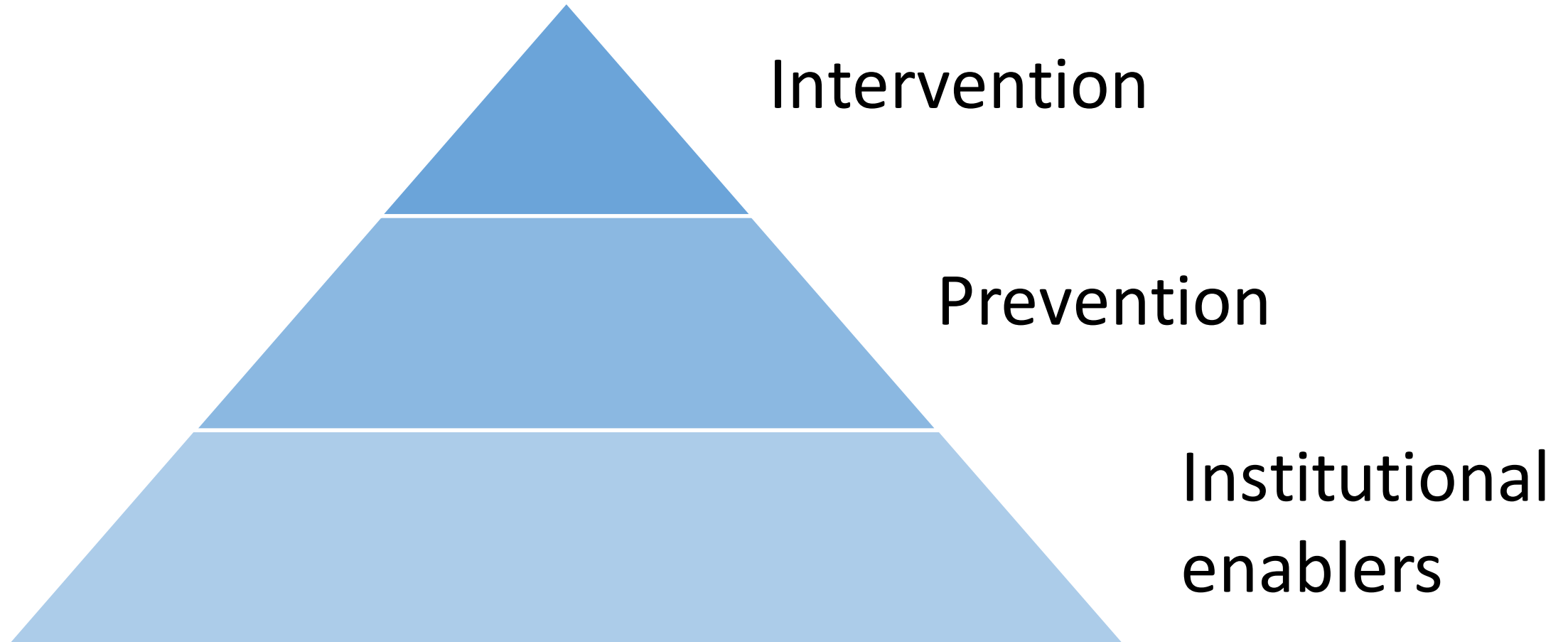
Queen's University in Canada is one of the exemplars of a "tone from the top"
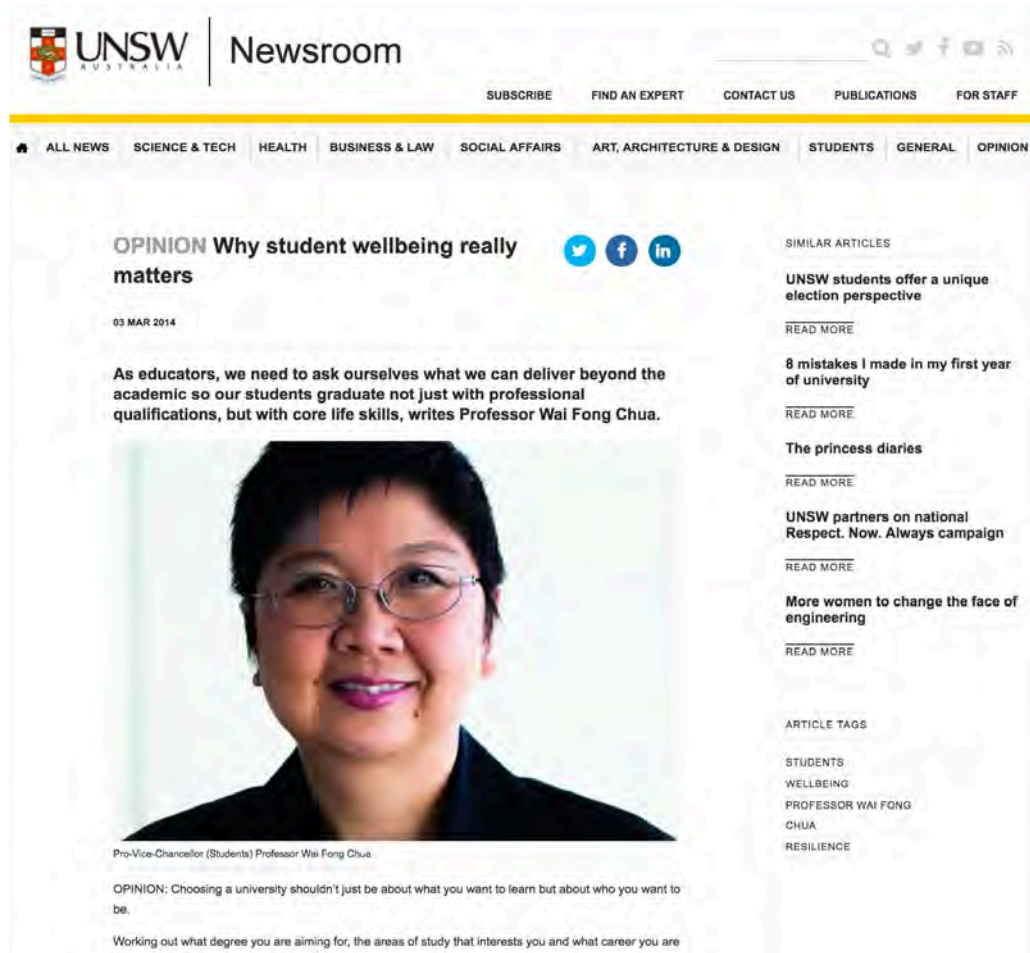
Mental Health

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.
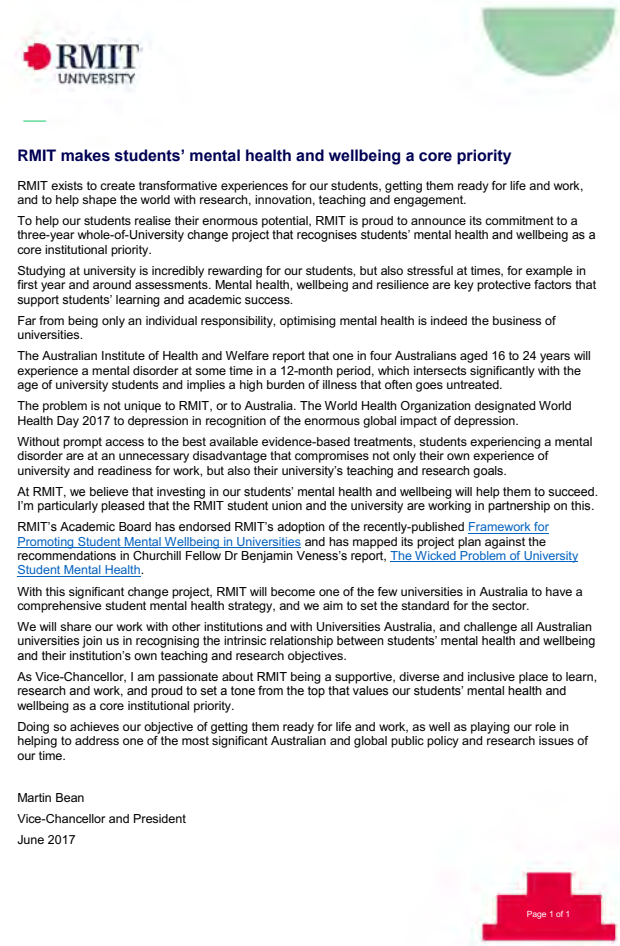
Principal Daniel Woolf

More Australian universities need a "tone from the top" that supports student mental health

UNSW | Newsroom

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OPINION **Why student wellbeing really matters**

03 MAR 2014

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.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) Professor Wai Fong Chua

OPINION: Choosing a university shouldn't just be about what you want to learn but about who you want to be.

Working out what degree you are aiming for, the areas of study that interests you and what career you are

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PROFESSOR WAI FONG CHUA
RESILIENCE

RMIT UNIVERSITY

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 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.

Martin Bean
Vice-Chancellor and President
June 2017

Page 1 of 1

Tertiary institutions have a special skill and role: research

REVIEW

CrossMark

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

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

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Springer

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

In memoriam Dr Chloe Abbott

The Wicked Problem of University Student Mental Health

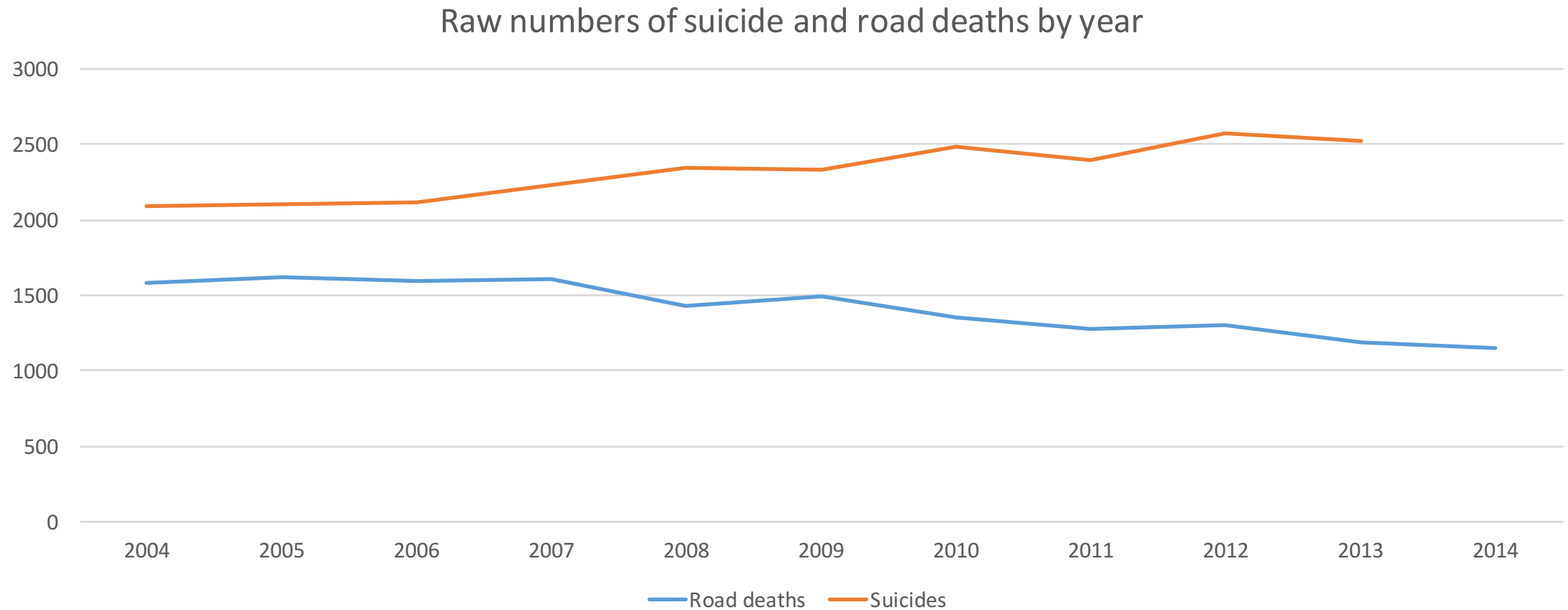Inaugural Australasian Mental Health and Higher Education Conference

James Cook University, Townsville, 30 June 2017

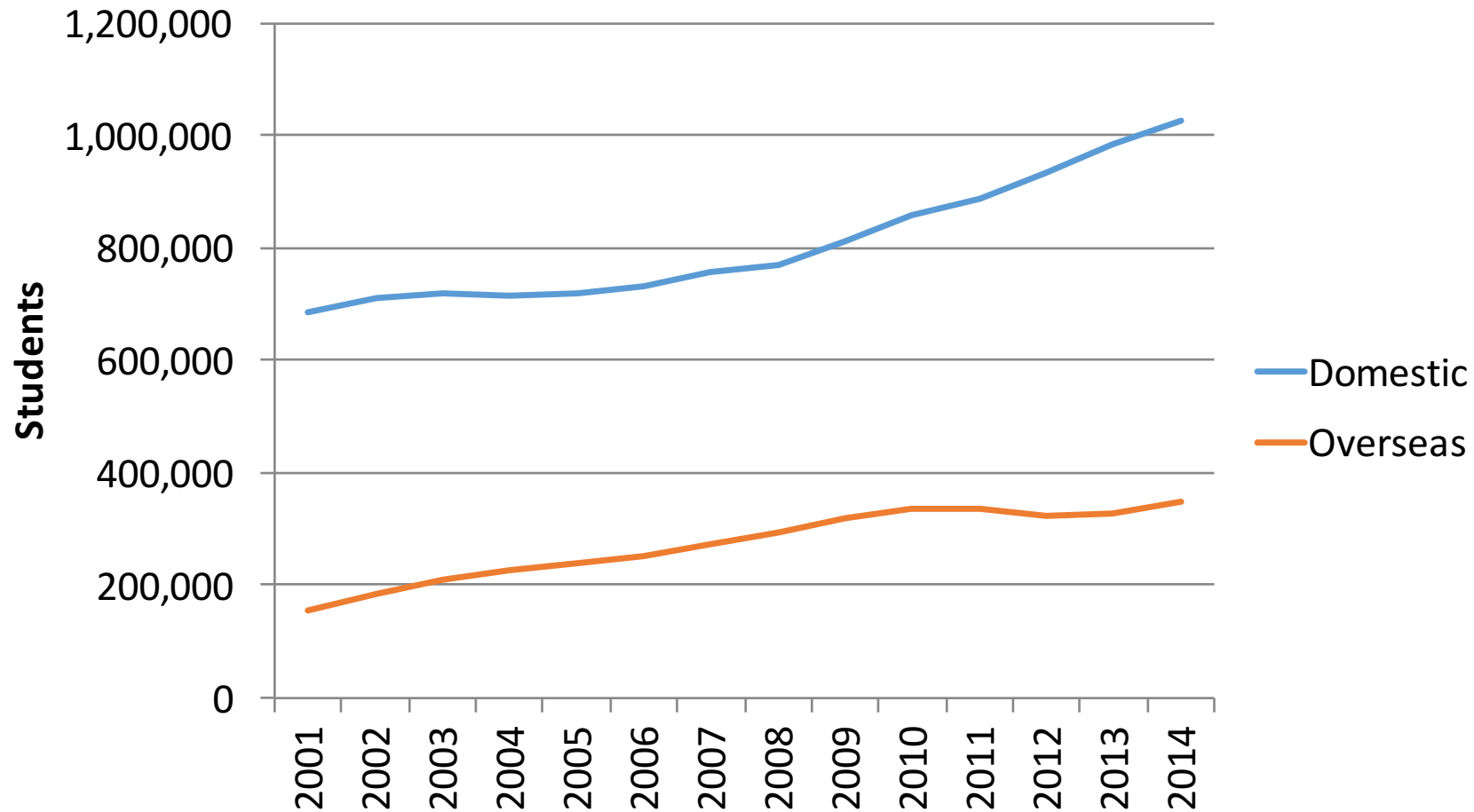**Benjamin G. Veness BAcc MBBS MPH**

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www.benveness.com

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

Raw numbers of suicide and road deaths by year

Road deaths   Suicides

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

The vast majority of these students are undergraduates