



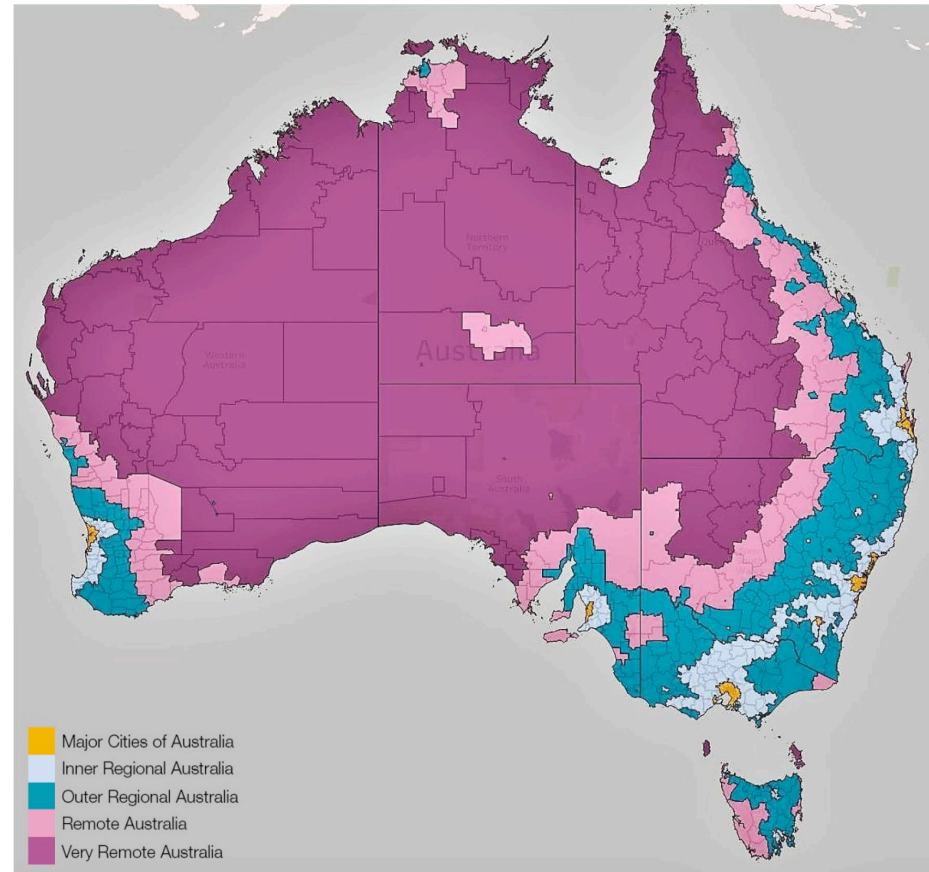
Supporting students' mental wellbeing during the pandemic: what can we learn from mature-aged students in regional & remote Australia?

Nicole Crawford , 2019/20 NCSEHE Equity Fellow

9th July 2020

2019/20 Equity Fellowship: Research topic

Investigating proactive approaches to supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students from/in regional and remote Australia



(Regional Education Expert Advisory Group 2019, p. 88.)

Significant issues underpin the topic

- Student mental health and wellbeing is of national (and international) concern
- Regional and remote students are in the national spotlight
- Why mature-aged students from regional and remote areas?
 - Attention is often paid to school leavers
 - Responding to calls for deeper understanding of the diversity and complexity of equity-group cohorts
 - Potential positive influence of mature-aged students on their families, peers, communities in regional and remote Australia

Current context: university student mental health

- Recent reports/projects in Australia
 - Baik et al. (2016, 2017)
 - Orygen (2017)
 - Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP), 2018 – Recommendation 8
- International blueprints/approaches/frameworks
 - Healthy Universities UK
 - Okanagan Charter (2015)

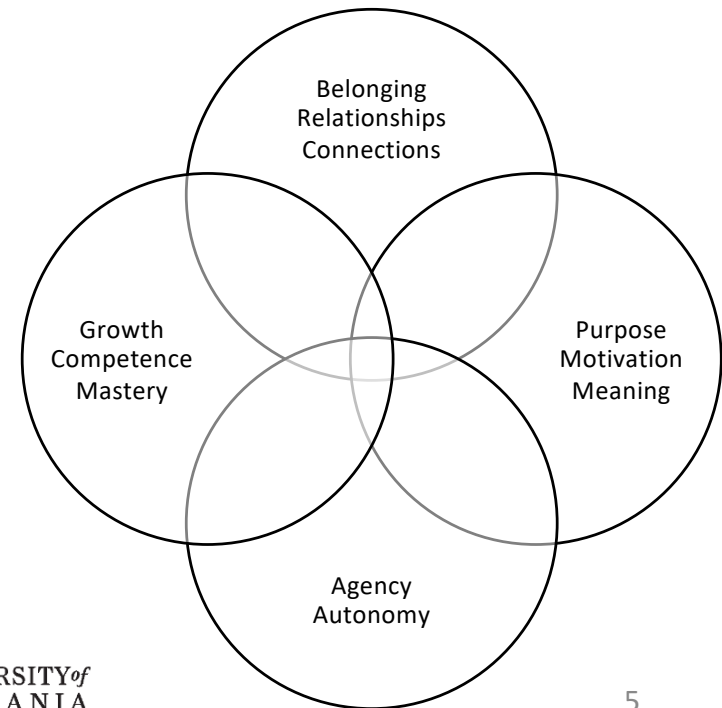
[Holistic, institution-wide, settings approaches!]

Mental wellbeing

For the purpose of this presentation, we'll understand “mental wellbeing” as being able to: manage “normal” stresses of uni and life, be productive, fulfilled, have a meaningful life... (adapted from the WHO)

Acknowledging that there are numerous definitions of mental health and models of wellbeing, this project is informed by the following:

- The WHO's definition
- MacKean's (2011) dual-continuum model
- Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-determination theory and adaptations of it for higher education, including:
 - Baik et al. (2016a, 2016c)
 - Woodyatt (2019, 2020)



Mixed methods

1. Australian Government: Department of Education, Skills and Employment data request
2. Student Survey (n=2,401) administered at universities around Australia
3. Student Interviews (n=51): in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one

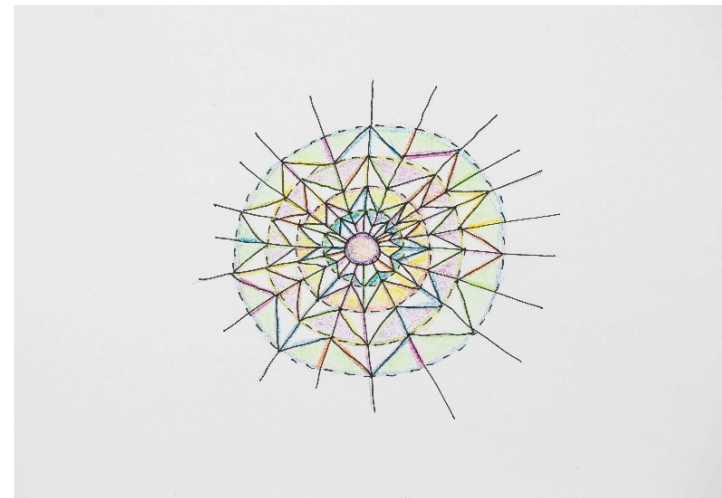
Characteristics of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia



- Diverse cohort with widely varying circumstances
- Compared to metro areas, this cohort is:
 - Older
 - Female
 - LSES
 - Studying online
 - Studying part-time
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Commitments: children, caring, work, community...
- Live in RR areas (rather than re-locate for study); First-in-family

The complexity of students' mental wellbeing

- Caught in a “juggling act”
- 47.7% (n=883) of the survey respondents considered withdrawing or deferring from their studies
- Top two reasons why they considered withdrawing or deferring:
 - “stress”
 - “feeling overwhelmed with their university study-load”



What can unis do to better support student mental wellbeing?

It's all about the teaching and learning!

The everyday interactions that students have with:

- teaching and support staff;
- their peers;
- the unit/subject content and curriculum; and
- the physical or online classroom

were found to be crucial in supporting students' mental wellbeing.

What can we learn from mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia?

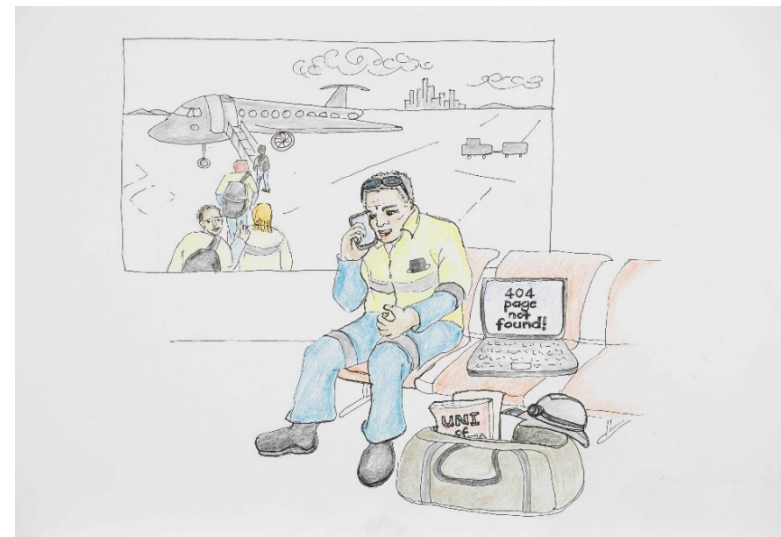
1. Know students' needs: understand their diverse circumstances
2. Be aware of practical challenges: e.g. bandwidth
3. Facilitate student connections
4. Provide opportunities for Q&As
5. Check in with students: online learning can be lonely and isolating
6. Promote your university's student services (e.g. Counselling)
7. Your impact is enormous: it's the small (human) actions that count

[My study] is a tiny desk in [the kids'] playroom. And I've got just a little swivel chair and a tiny little desk, and stuff cluttered around everywhere. Often I'm listening to a lecture with the kids climbing on top of me... so concentration can be harder. Sometimes I bring my laptop out and I'll listen to lectures while I'm doing the dishes, or while I'm cooking dinner. Yeah, it's tricky.

1. Know students' needs: understand their diverse circumstances

Take an inclusive approach to your course content, delivery and LMS tools; think about:

- Who is it including? Who is it excluding?
- For example, if you're offering synchronous sessions, not all students will be available at the scheduled time. Provide material asynchronously too.
- Accommodate all students [Follow Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles: multiple means of representation, engagement & expression]



*[The Internet] does drop out, and we do lose connectivity...
afternoons are worse... And, it's also impossible to watch a
lecture when there's no download.*

2. Be aware of practical challenges: e.g. bandwidth

- Keep your technology simple.
- Ensure that lecture recordings and other materials are downloadable, not just stream-able.

The ability to actually talk with other students face to face about an assignment and how they're approaching it and how they've interpreted a question and all that; that's priceless.

And just encouragement, too. I think having someone there on Facebook that you can just message and go, "You know, I've had a rough time with this," or, "You know, this assignment's been really difficult." Yeah, you've sort of got someone else who can relate to you.

3. Facilitate student connections

- Provide opportunities on your LMS for students to communicate synchronously (e.g. Collaborate/Skype/Zoom meetings) and asynchronously (e.g. Discussion boards).
- Take a few minutes at the beginning or end of synchronous sessions for some lighter/informal communication.
- Ask questions on the Discussion boards that encourage students to share something (e.g. an interest/hobby) about them.
- A lot of online students use closed Facebook groups as an online forum for students in their unit/course.



One of the biggest things that holds you up on assignments is that you've got a question and you post the question to the forum, and you have a look and it hasn't been answered, or you don't really understand it still, and sometimes it can take a while to get a response.

4. Provide opportunities for Q&As

- Dedicate a regular Collaborate/Skype/Zoom meeting for Q&As.
- You could shift your student consultation times to an online meeting.
- Just because a lot of students aren't responding to your discussion posts doesn't mean they aren't reading them and benefiting from them.
- Provide students with clear expectations about your response times for emails and discussion posts.

Have someone that can check in with the student from time to time - a simple call to see how they are progressing or if they need any help. Speaking from experience I won't ask for help I will tackle everything on my own, which normally means I end up stressed. Some people are too embarrassed to ask for help.

5. Check in with students: online learning can be lonely and isolating

- Be approachable and proactive in supporting students.
- Check in with students semi-regularly in a personalised way via email.
- Depending on your staff-to-student ratio, you could check in via phone.
- Alternatively, a short (2 minute) video is a way to check in with large numbers of students, and for them to see you.

Reminders that support services are available and there is no harm in using them.

I think the more separated you are, the less likely you are to know of what you can do or things you can access.

6. Promote your university's services

- Draw your students' attention to your university's student services.
- These services have also been reorienting their practice to deliver appointments and workshops online.
- You could send reminders a few times per semester and in different ways: e.g. email newsletter, discussion/announcement on the LMS, at the beginning or end of a class.



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The lecturer sent me an email as he noticed I had dropped the subject and was checking in to see why. I explained that I dropped due to personal stressors. He replied empathetically and wished me well. He didn't have to check in... it was meaningful to me at the time.

7. Your impact is enormous: it's the small (human) actions that count

Don't forget the impact of your actions – it's the little, kind, human things that really matter!

Thank you!

- Please note that the report from this Equity Fellowship will be released on the NCSEHE website later this year:
<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/>
- For a handout related to today's presentation, see:
<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/student-wellbeing-covid-19-regional-remote-australia/>

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Illustrations

The beautiful illustrations in the Fellowship report and included in this presentation are by Morag Porteous.

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