

## Guest Editorial

# Psychological Wellbeing and Distress in Higher Education

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### “Psychological wellbeing is everyone’s business.”

This statement was the catch-cry of the Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention and Success (STARS) Conference held in Adelaide, South Australia in 2017. How people defined wellbeing might have varied - some defined it as a proxy for mental illness and distress, others as an indicator of mental robustness and resilience - but the need was clear. Estimates at the time suggested that 1 in 5 students were experiencing psychological distress during their time at university, and that wellbeing declined over the time a person is at university, never again returning to baseline even after graduation (Larcombe et al., 2016; Stallman, 2008; 2010). Whether the question was to reduce prevalence and severity of distress, or to promote optimal development and resilience, there was consensus throughout the Conference that the higher education sector needed to pay attention.

Since 2017, the call to make wellbeing everyone’s business has spread. In Australia, the Higher Education Standards Panel report on *Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education* recommended that every institution should have an institution-wide mental health strategy and implementation plan (Department of Education, 2018). In addition, Orygen (National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health), released their report *Under the radar: The mental health of Australian university students* (Orygen, 2017) calling government attention to the issue in Australia. Students themselves are now calling out for wellbeing development, support, and equipping. Students’ definition of success includes being able to adapt and respond to one’s own and others’ wellbeing (Delahunty & O’Shea, 2019) as well as maintain meaningful personal goals beyond academia (Foyster & Brooker, 2019). Additionally, with increasing focus on graduate outcomes, psychological wellbeing literacy and self-management is a key resource for professional life across the lifespan, across all employment sectors (Cranney & Dunn, 2011).

Higher education providers are potentially well-placed to support the development of these psychological literacies of students, and consequently a large portion of the emerging workforce. University is a period of transition in life (e.g. change of career) and for many, also occurs during the developmental period of young adulthood. These transitions are related to increased vulnerability to a decline in psychological wellbeing. Further, from a self-determination perspective, promoting wellbeing during any transition can help people achieve optimal developmental trajectories that extend well beyond the transition itself. Thus, by supporting students’ psychological wellbeing, higher education institutions can not only reduce the risk of onset of psychological problems, but also help graduates to reach their full potential, be more psychologically literate, better able to



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support their own and others' wellbeing, able to be open about their experiences of mental health, and willing to lead and make structural changes that will improve local and global communities.

Fortuitously, excellent resources have been developed in across the world in response to this challenge. These resources attend to the wider context of student psychological wellbeing. For example, Healthy Universities Network U.K. (<https://healthyuniversities.ac.uk/healthy-universities/>), the Okanagan Charter (2015) in Canada, and the Framework for Promoting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in Australia (Baik et al. 2017; <http://unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/>). These resources represent provide excellent frameworks for supporting psychological wellbeing in Higher Education.

Consequently, many universities around the world have now initiated wellbeing strategies that encompass psychological wellbeing. These resources can be leveraged for change to better support students. This special issue outlines a variety of strategies that people across higher education are using, to understand and address the complex issues related to psychological wellbeing. The articles in this special issue advise on four key strategies that we (the higher education sector) can achieve:

**First, we can identify the scope of the problem.** With that, we need to be specific about the changes we want to see and then assess that change in order to test or demonstrate efficacy. As described by **van Agteren, Woodyatt, Iasiello, Rayner and Kyrios** we need to clearly define and measure both mental wellbeing and psychological distress. Using this approach, van Agteren and colleagues introduce current research suggesting that university students will benefit not only from support related to psychological distress, but strategies to improve both wellbeing and resilience. **Scott and Takarangi** present us with a systematic review on PhD student psychological wellbeing, demonstrating that despite the clear need, most research on PhD student wellbeing only considers psychological distress and neglects wider aspects of psychological wellbeing and mental health.

**Second, we can identify specific vulnerable cohorts.** There might be sensitive periods of the student experience that can lead to increased risk of decline in mental health or periods that represent opportunities to build resilience and wellbeing. They are also likely to be factors that moderate the impact of contextual factors on student psychological wellbeing. For example, students transitioning to university continue to represent a sensitive period – where students' experience elevated risk but where there is also a possibility to support growth. **Xing and Bolden** show that international students experience of wellbeing can be impacted on by their language acquisition. **Grüttner** shows how the unique migration experience of refugee students can impact their wellbeing, and how this can be moderated by experiences of belonging within their course of study.

**Third, we can develop targeted means of support.** Some academics might be wary of aligning their curriculum with wellbeing, especially if the theories do not naturally align with the discipline. In this special issue, **Johnson, Bauman and Pociask** report on the success of embedding wellbeing practices within a multidisciplinary writing course. Although there were fears of trepidation from students and others, the success of the course in providing strong learning outcomes and supporting students' resilience are clear. **Agnew, Poole and Khan** show that questions about student wellbeing should not only focus on activities during the semester, but also on the impact and timing of the mid-semester break.

Alongside the curriculum, there are other aspects of university life that can play an important role, such as teachers and faculty staff. As argued in this issue by **Brooker, McKague and Philips**, we need to consider how dynamic systems of each institution interact with each other, and what this means for available resources and efforts required for our initiatives. **Maymon, Hall and Harley** demonstrate that the quality (rather than quantity) of staff support is important for student wellbeing during transition. However, and as, **James, Strevens Field and Wilson** demonstrate among law teachers across two countries, educators are only well placed to support their students' wellbeing if their own wellbeing is protected and supported by their institution. In some cases, such as students' recovery from failure, **Ajjawi, Boud, Zacharias, Dracup and Bennett** note that primary support might not come from the academics themselves, but instead come from friends and family around the student. Supporting these relationships might also be an important key in fostering students' resilience and psychological wellbeing.

Each of these strategies also demonstrate the importance of closely aligning to the strategic priorities of the institution (as a place of higher education). Strategic leadership is important for guiding and directing funding, scaffolding and scaling initiatives, integrating within wider strategic foci, evaluating outcomes and applying a lens of critical evidence-based reasoning to decision-making. Within the business sector we are starting to see companies recognise the importance of strategic leadership

roles (e.g. Chief Wellbeing Officer). These types of leadership positions enable top down prioritisation, which is essential to tackling change within complex, interacting, dynamic systems and managing resources most effectively.

***Fourth, we need to establish widespread psychological literacy.*** Good leadership is vital, but alone it is not enough. Many staff feel that they are not expert enough to act. Just as physical health is supported by communities where everyone is educated in health and integrating healthy lifestyle choices into daily practice (e.g. balanced diets, preventative dental care, regular exercise), mental health needs to be similarly supported by psychologically literate communities. This does not mean communities need to be aware of psychological diagnosis, but rather, communities should: (i) be aware of the impact that mental health problems can have on a person's life, and (ii) be aware of available supports and pathways of recovery; and (iii) feel supported and comfortable asking for, or offering, help toward those pathways. **Melinda Chadwick** describes one approach to developing the psychological literacy of professional staff, often a key first point of support for students, as a means of supporting student psychological wellbeing. The curriculum remains the key vehicle for educators to support students in the most equitable, accountable, and scalable ways.

To make wellbeing *everyone's business*, we need to treat wellbeing as *core business*. All staff need an awareness of psychological health to be able to provide foundational strategies for maintaining our own psychological health, and to know what to do when we have a student showing signs of elevated distress. Supporting student wellbeing needs to be equipped, staff trained, roles and responsibilities clearly defined, and the work recognised as part of everyday business for all staff. We hope that readers find evidence of various strategies and approaches that achieve this and that can guide success in their own contexts.

## **In This Special Issue**

Further to the review above, here we proudly offer brief outlines of each article in this special issue. The diversity of approaches demonstrated across these articles speaks to the complexity of addressing student psychological wellbeing. We have broadly divided these 11 papers into the four strategies outlined above.

### ***Defining and Assessing the Scope of the Problem***

Two papers help to define the scope of psychological wellbeing in higher education and ways of assessing it. Across these papers we see that psychological wellbeing is a multifaceted and complex issues, and that consequently there are no single causes of the decline in psychological wellbeing – nor simple fixes.

Joseph van Agteren and colleagues argue for the importance of considering the multiple elements of wellbeing, namely, distress and mental wellbeing and resilience. They demonstrate how these elements provide different but complimentary perspectives of mental health, for a large group of students utilising an online mental health resource.

Hannah Scott and Melinda Takarangi provide a systematic review of research regarding the wellbeing of research graduate (PhD) students. There is growing concern regarding the high levels of isolation and psychological distress among this population. They argue that there is a need to understand wellbeing (and offer guidance on the multiple existing definitions and an admirable preference for Carol Ryff's seven dimensions of psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989). Their review reveals that most empirical research in this space focuses on the experiences of distress and isolation, rather than wellbeing. This speaks to the concern and foreboding regarding mental health issues among PhD candidates.

### ***Identifying Vulnerable Cohorts***

Across these papers we see themes that relate to sensitive periods for psychological wellbeing. We use the term “sensitive” in the developmental sense, to refer to periods where a person is readily influenced by the environment in such a way as to lead to growth in resilience and wellbeing or exacerbate risk. In this special issue this includes the transition to university, migration and acculturation, and responding to failure. Exploration of wellbeing during these periods also allows us to identify the types of factors that can exacerbate or attenuate risk for psychological decline, or foster psychological wellbeing.

Deyu (Cindy) Xing and Benjamin Bolden explore international student wellbeing, examining the impact of acculturation and language acquisition on wellbeing, through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. This article reports a multiple case study

that explores the lived academic acculturation experiences of four Chinese international students with limited oral English capacity. Findings indicated all four students experienced significant psychological stress during their academic acculturation as a direct result of their limited spoken English capacity, which negatively impacted their sense of competence, autonomy and particularly relatedness. Emotional pain, involuntary isolation, helplessness, and regret emerged as the salient themes from the cross-case analysis.

Michael Grüttner presents research on study preparation programs in German higher education institutions and refugee students' psychological wellbeing. Examining international and refugee students suggests that social exclusion reduces wellbeing, but course belonging can function as a social resource of resilience for refugee students in study preparation. Higher education institutions can strengthen feelings of social inclusion and psychological wellbeing of refugee students by fostering their belongingness in study preparation courses.

### ***Developing Targeted Means of Support***

Jeannine Johnson and colleagues describe the development, implementation and evaluation of a first-year interdisciplinary writing course designed to help students learn about health and wellness. The authors faced challenges that we expect to resonate with readers, such as trepidation about student perspectives of the content, and statistical issues evaluating courses with small cohorts. The qualitative feedback from students demonstrates that wellbeing curriculum development does not need to focus solely on wellbeing. Rather, successful approaches can be achieved by embedding regular activities and options for students.

Michael Agnew and colleagues consider the impact that the week-long Autumn (Fall) break can have on students, with varied results. Although some students report benefits of the break for catching up or getting ahead, others described their acute stress from the compression of assessments immediately before or after the break, and others described stress from the break in routine. This paper demonstrates the importance of considering the "negative space" of the semester: asking not only how assessments align across concurrent subjects, but also how they make use of holidays and time away from campus. Ensuring that students are challenged but not overwhelmed during mid-semester breaks, and returning refreshed rather than burnt-out, might be an important task for all coordinators concerned with student mental health.

Abi Brooker and colleagues examine the complex systems involved in creating a sustainable chain within universities that will support student wellbeing. They report on an emerging initiative that applies dynamic systems theory to inform preparing and developing a whole-of-curriculum approach to wellbeing. The authors argue that a dynamic systems approach enables addressing the needs of multiple stakeholders and remaining flexible to changes within surrounding systems.

Rebecca Maymon and colleagues explore sources, quality and quantity of support and the impact of these supports on wellbeing through transition. They examine wellbeing among first-year students attending Canadian and U.S. higher education institutions. Overall, the study findings highlight the importance of evaluating the quality of support received by first-year students during the transition to higher education, not only the frequency, and show faculty/staff support to be an important contributor to student wellbeing.

James and colleagues investigate the relationship between university systems of administration, teaching, and learning, and how these relate to wellbeing. They asked 293 law teachers, in Australia and the UK, about their perceptions of their students' wellbeing, their own wellbeing, and how their university could support both. Teachers' qualitative responses indicated they were more aware of their students' wellbeing than their own wellbeing. Most respondents were critical of the neoliberal approach to higher education (e.g., treating the student as consumer rather than learner) because this diminished teachers' experiences of autonomy and good teaching. These experiences suggest that increasing teacher autonomy might be an effective way to support experiences of teacher wellbeing, which could consequently support student wellbeing.

Ajjawi and colleagues explore the relationship between wellbeing and coping with failure. They tack the question: How students who fail can be better supported to continue successfully? They examine the experience of students who had failed and persisted, and identify drivers for persistence and how students adapted in response to academic failure. This report was initially a research paper at the 2018 STARS Conference, which was then invited for publication in this special issue.

### ***Establish Widespread Psychological Literacy***

Finally, Melinda Chadwick brings our attention to the roles and efforts of professional staff in supporting student wellbeing. Drawing on her staff's own experience of staff and student issues with space, she reports a "learned optimism" approach in which staff support each other and provide flexible, dialogical partnerships with students to overcome challenges. By working with students to address the practical space issue, they helped students develop ownership and responsibility for the issue. Their report speaks to the importance of partnership and of encouraging full teams to take an approach underpinned by a theoretical understanding of resilience and positive psychology. This report was presented as an emerging initiative at the 2018 STARS Conference, which was then invited for publication in this special issue.

### ***Guiding Questions as You Read***

We want to pose some questions that you can ask yourself as you reflect on the various work presented within this special issue. These questions can also be a guide as you evaluate and develop approaches within your own university.

1. *What do we mean when we say psychological wellbeing?*
2. *Is wellbeing at the centre of the student and staff experience, or something relegated to the fringes? One potential indicator of this is the degree to which psychological wellbeing literacy is developed and supported within the curriculum itself.*
3. *How is wellbeing measured or assessed – is there any way that we can monitor outcomes or change?*
4. *How can we support students to become aware of their own wellbeing?*
5. *What mechanisms are there for coordinated leadership and action across the sector, and institution or even a department?*
6. *Where are staff and students partnering together to find solutions to improve psychological wellbeing?*
7. *What is the responsibility of a university and what is not? How are university services integrated with those provided by government and the community to enable adequate support of all those in need (particularly those in remote or rural locations)?*
8. *If I only have 1 hour a week – what changes could I make at my university so that it becomes a place that enables psychological wellbeing?*

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