

Enhancing wellbeing for international students and the staff who support them – what is working and for who?

Dr Anna Dabrowski

Research team:

Dr Michelle Hsien

Dr Tamara Van der Zant

Syeda Kashfee Ahmed



Overview

- 1. Enhancing wellbeing for international students and the staff that support them**
2. Previous studies, and research into educator readiness to support student mental health
3. Findings and conclusions
4. Recommendations and ideas for supporting staff and students

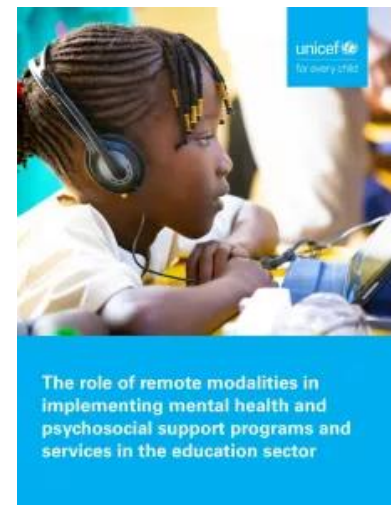
How did we get here?

Research focus:

- mental health interventions from K-12
- digital mental health interventions in school and tertiary settings
- school based mental health interventions in HI settings, LMICS, and EiEs
- educator mental health and wellbeing studies
- work with DFAT, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNESCO GEM Report, and USAID
- review group for WHO/UNICEF global guidelines on student and staff wellbeing from EC-tertiary levels

= Lack of evidence on educator support mechanisms

= Lack of evidence on tertiary staff and students, including international students



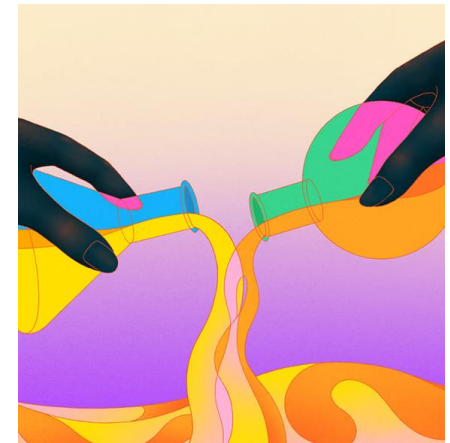


“We went to see what universities were doing and there was nothing... No evidence-based programs available. We were really surprised”

(Dr Sam McKay, Research Fellow in Suicide Prevention, Orygen)

Today's focus: Educator readiness to support (international) student mental health in Australian tertiary settings

- Rapid review of literature
- Survey of educator stress and worry (n=122)
- Interviews with tertiary educators, subject and student support coordinators, and psychologists (n=26)
- Triangulation of data



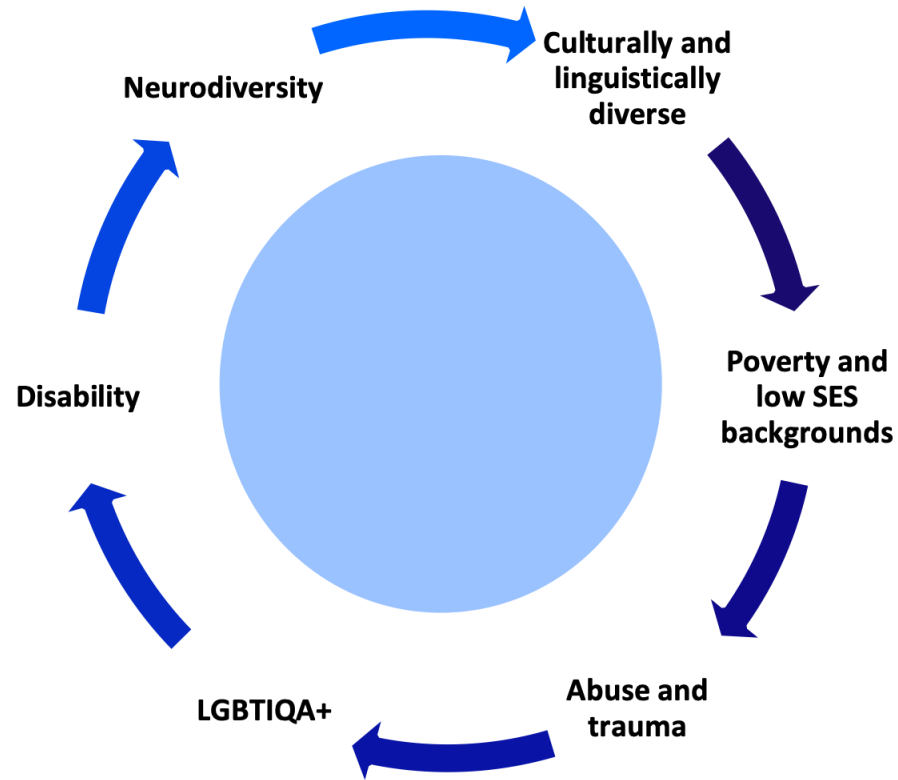
A (research-informed) quiz

1. International students feel safe and secure in Australia
 2. It is easy for international students to make friends in Australia
 3. International students have many chances to improve their English
 4. International students are at greater risk of experiencing poor mental health than local students
 5. International students are less likely to seek help for mental health issues than local students
 6. International students face different pressures than local students
 7. All universities and higher education institutes have mental health support services, including for complex issues
 8. It is easy for teachers to include international students in class activities
 9. Teachers know how to help students who have mental health concerns
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What the literature tells us about tertiary educators

- Educators carry 'too much' burden
- High (and ever growing) workload and expectations
- Shortages and attrition linked to stress, worry, massification, marketisation, technologisation
- Lack of appreciation for the profession
- Diverse, and large student populations
- Growing perception of role to include the detection of mental health conditions, and to connect students with relevant supports
- Willingness to support, but not sure how?

Diverse learning needs in today's tertiary classroom



(Adapted from: UNESCO, 2024, p.2, Fig.1)

Research Questions

RQ1: How does educator anxiety and worry impact on their ability to support student mental health?

RQ2: To what extent are educators ready (and willing) to support student mental health in education settings?

RQ3: What are the enabling conditions that support educator readiness?

Data Collection

10-minute survey

- Participants' context and background
- Overall wellbeing
- Reasons for being worried
- Open ended items

Interview/Focus groups

- Understanding how mental health connects with learning
- How they/their site understands intervention effectiveness
- How they choose where to spend their limited time and funds
- What hinders educator capacity to support student's mental health

What's Your Worry?



This survey is part of a national ACER initiative to understand what works, and what is needed, to more effectively support educator and student mental health. It asks questions about your experiences of worry and stress in your role, and what additional supports might help. As an education professional, we encourage you to share your important views about what is currently causing you worry in the workplace.

- We are seeking your views about each statement and there are no right or wrong answers.
- Your answers are anonymous and will be kept confidential. Only summarised results are reported.
- Select **Go**, if you consent to complete this [10 minute](#) survey.

Thank you – your insights and support are greatly appreciated.

Go

[Go to LIVE SURVEY](#) or [preview to test](#)

To give us a sense of your context...

Please select your location:

- ACT
- NSW
- ...
- Not in Australia – please enter your country: _____



What is your postcode? [numeric]

Which best describes your current context?

Please select one.

I mainly work...

- in an early learning preschool setting
- in a school setting
- in a tertiary setting
- in another setting: _____

What characteristics best describe your current role?

Please select all that apply.

I am a...

- Pre-service educator: tertiary student studying to become an educator
- Educator in a school or early learning setting
- Tertiary educator: lecturer or instructor of pre-service educators
- School or preschool Leader: Director, Principal, Acting, Deputy
- Education support staff: Learning Support Officer, Teacher Aide
- School counsellor, psychologist or wellbeing leader
- Out-of-hours educator/carer
- Other: _____

Maintaining your privacy is paramount – see [ACER](#) privacy statement
[VIEW OVERVIEW REPORT](#) (1234)

Finding: Workload

- Reported difficulties in meeting the mental health needs of students due to rising workloads and insufficient institutional support.
- Stress of balancing teaching, research, marking, and supervising student
- Increasingly competitive expectations to publish research, apply for grants, and contribute to the academic community as contributing factors to their own mental health status as well as their ability to support that of their students.
- Committee participation and curricula development, and more recently, online teaching, were all seen as contributing to ‘burnout’ amongst tertiary staff

“ *Workload and deadlines; ability to tailor teaching to meet student-learning needs and expectations; ability to adapt teaching to changing social/cultural and other circumstances such as changing patterns of student engagement, student preparedness for study, attention and wellbeing issues” (Tertiary Educator)*

“ *When you become an academic, when you start working in a university, you're on email for the rest of your life. Like, that's just how it is...” (Lecturer)*

Findings: Job insecurity

- Casualisation of the workforce
- Higher levels of stress, staff turnover
- Lack of continuity, inability to properly support students
- Lack of ability to form long-term connections with other academic staff, or seek support
- Lack of training provided to support students due to employment status (casualisation)

“ “ *The more sessionals you have, the less continuity you have. That's one of the key problems of having lots of sessionals, not only for the sessional person themselves, but for the university... you sacrifice a lot by not having permanent staff” (Subject Coordinator)*

“ “ *You have all the new tutors going through this training that haven't been there for a long time thinking, alright, well, that's outside of my pay grade” (Lecturer)*

“ “ *I think everyone needs to take a beat to go, what does the landscape actually look like? Because if we are going to have people who want to stay around, yeah, who are fit for work, for longevity, we have to invest in them” (Head of Student Services)*

Findings: Stress and support

- Large and diverse populations
- Challenges of intervention with adults
- Inconsistent messaging about well-being and mental health and wellbeing across discipline area
- Differences in health sciences vs education
- Knowledge of mental health and wellbeing support systems are minimal
- Lack of peer support
- Lack of transparency around access to mental health resources for students and staff
- Insufficient induction and training on strategies to manage student behaviour at PST is lacking.

“ “ *There's such little training, you know for staff, and what I've certainly noticed, I guess, is the compassion... of staff just reduces cause they're all burnt out and fried themselves” (University Tutor)*

“ “ *We've all done it. We've got the memo or the meeting minute or the policy, which is that's no longer my fault because I've [the University] put that policy out there” (University Tutor)*

“ “ *Do a self-paced HR thing because then you've got work, health, safety. We've ticked that box, that we're all compliant” (University Tutor)*

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Findings: Diverse student needs

- “ “ *I don't think I anticipated the volume of students who were going through the process of being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, for example, or dealing with transgender issues and other kind of gender and sexuality issues. Or the number of students who are trying to cope with anxiety, and particularly in an online environment” (Subject Coordinator)*
- “ “ *If your anxiety is that acute, how do you cope with the demands in a contemporary secondary classroom?” (Subject Coordinator)*
- “ “ *Does education attract students who are experiencing difficulty at school? I don't know... Why would you become a teacher if you hate school” (Lecturer)*

Finding: International Student Challenges

“ “ *They'll come and listen to me, but they'll get to me when we're at breaking point with, you know, I'm the one that's sitting with them in emergency. By that time, it's too late. So because we've already had an attempt on life or we've already done something or we're about to be committed and you know...it's too late”*
(Head of Student Services)

“ “ *... maybe they're a bit more reluctant to access help at university. You know, they've already been reasonably successful at school. They think they can cope, but the level of complexity of the work....”* (Subject Coordinator)

“Many international students do not have the same level of support or connectedness as locals. No family to reach to for advice, financial support, housing in a crisis ... few friends who totally understand their culture”

Key messages and implications

Educators in tertiary settings experience high levels of stress, worry, and anxiety

These stressors impact educators' ability to support students' needs

Students' needs- and the expectations of institutions are continually evolving



What works for supporting international students

- Clear mental health guidelines and standard frameworks
- Prevention and early intervention
- Reducing stigma and raising awareness
- Mental health first aid
- Integration of wellbeing focused practices (including adjusted assessments)
- Peer mentoring and support
- Digital services and tools
- Collaboration with organisations that support international students
- Qualified, intercultural health professionals

Are educators ready to support student mental health?



What do educators need?

- **Support from Leadership**
- Professional learning
- Time to develop mental health literacy
- Effective policies and guidelines- that are transparent and communicated to all staff
- Knowledge of referral pathways
- Accessible and evidence-based resources
- Culturally responsive resources and knowledge of services
- Collaboration opportunities
- Accountability mechanisms



Practical ideas for educators working with international students



PRIORITISE
INCLUSION



KNOW REFERRAL
PATHWAYS



TAKE TIME TO
TALK



ASK FOR HELP



BE FLEXIBLE

Limitations



Useful Resources

Enhancing Student Wellbeing [Home - Enhancing Student Wellbeing for Learning \(unistudentwellbeing.edu.au\)](https://unistudentwellbeing.edu.au)

Mental health first Aid [Homepage | Mental Health First Aid \(mhfa.com.au\)](https://mhfa.com.au)

TEQSA Student Wellbeing Resources

<https://www.teqsa.gov.au/students/student-wellbeing>

Universal Design for Learning [UDL: The UDL Guidelines \(cast.org\)](https://cast.org)

University Mental Health Framework [University Mental Health Framework - Orygen, Revolution in Mind](#)

Useful (and free) services

- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14 – Counselling and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- **Beyond Blue:** 1300 22 4636 – 24/7 counselling and support
- **Grief Line:** 1300 845 745 – 6am – 2am, 7 days a week support
- **Salvation Army Careline:** 1300 36 36 22 – 24/7 support
- **QLife:** 1800 184 527 – 3pm – 12am Australia wide, 7 days a week specifically for the LGBTQIA+ community
- **International Student Hotline:** 1300 363 079 – From Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm
- **Friendline:** 1800 424 287- Monday-Friday, 6-8pm

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