DARREN BRITTEN: Hi everyone, and thanks for tuning in to this ADCET podcast. This episode will be an audio recap of a webinar titled: Managing complex and challenging mental health situations, presented by Brandon Taylor. Brandon is the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Manager at TAFE Queensland and in this presentation, he focuses on what mental ill health can look like and how to manage situations where there is a lack of progress or unacceptable behaviour due to mental ill health. Over to you, Brandon.

BRANDON TAYLOR: Let me first of all say that I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands where I am today, here in South Brisbane, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. It's one webinar and it's one conversation, so quite clearly we're not going to be addressing or I won't be addressing every single scenario or situation, but it's a conversation that we absolutely need to have within our organisations. Today I'll be using the term 'teachers' and 'educators', and that really covers lecturers, industry trainers - frankly anybody that actually delivers a course or a program of study. I'll use that interchangeably, and of course all of the support services staff and many others in your organisations. So, let's have a little look about what it is that we're going to try and cover today. The behaviours - I'm going to specify one very particular group of students, but we're going to look at some behaviours particularly around inquiry for study and enrolment. We'll also look at the start of study and what those conversations can look like, both informal and formal. I'll touch on some of the abilities and limitations and I'll make some observations. I'm always very keen to try to look at things from the students' perspective as much as we can, but it's important that we try to do that. And then we'll also have a consideration around how we manage some of the activities that, frankly, are challenging, and we're going to define what 'challenging' is. Hopefully we'll tick off quite a few different things as we go. So, the context for me - and I'm going to say this up front and I'm going to say it again towards the end of this webinar - the context here I want you to be very, very clear about. So, the obvious statement is that across the tertiary sector there are many students who will experience mental ill health at some time during their studies. Absolutely to be expected. Absolutely predictable. Simply a reflection of society and the age of the students that we have. And in the vast majority of those individuals, despite the very personal impacts on the individual, we hope that the vast majority of those students can access either student supports through our organisations, whatever they may be, and where possible that individuals can access specific mental health service provision, whether that's through their GP, connecting or reconnecting with a mental health practitioner, and whatever treatment may follow after that. And it may well be the case that a number of students will require and will be able to easily enough have reasonable adjustments applied to their studies. So, they're the vast majority, and of course I recognise and acknowledge the many, many staff in our organisations who will experience mental ill health. But the context of this particular webinar is actually on a very small number of individuals. They are the very small number of students whose mental ill health is so disruptive to their thinking, to their thoughts or their behaviours that they are unable to successfully engage and participate in their chosen program of study. And the reason that I'm focusing on that very small number of people is because they can be the most challenging conversations and situations to manage for both teachers and also for support services staff. It's an interesting one, but I think it's worth mentioning that, of course, there's a number of reasons why people want to study, why they want to progress with enrolment. I think it's certainly worth acknowledging that we sometimes see individuals who are clearly very unwell, and they have been advised, sometimes by mental health services and practitioners, 'Why don't you go and enrol in a course. This will be good for you. This will give you structure. This will give you something to focus on.' I think it's just worth acknowledging that, whilst the sentiment is all very well and good, it's done without any real consideration of the stresses and challenges that academic study and industry training actually requires of an individual or puts on an individual. I think it's also worth acknowledging that earn or learn, if you wish to call it that, which pushes people who are clearly not well into either seeking employment or enrolling because there's an external force that requires them to do so - those things can be problematic, and I'm sure that many of you have seen those situations. So, when we talk about mental health, and I assume that you are all very, very familiar with this, but it's something that I like to cover with our educators, because this kind of session is something that I present to educators. We're talking about that state of wellbeing where the individual can realise their own abilities and they can cope with the normal stresses of life and be productive and be fruitful. So, in the context of this conversation and the context of the small number of individuals we're talking about, we are talking about that ability to cope with those normal stresses and be productive in their chosen studies. I think for many of us who have been around for long enough it's very, very clear that there has always been a number of students with mental health challenges, and probably typically over the longer term you'll have seen those with anxiety, depression, maybe bipolar, but in more recent years we're seeing a lot more diagnoses of personality disorders, maybe PTSD and others. So we're definitely seeing more students presenting with a diagnosis. We're also seeing more students presenting with what we would see as symptoms of mental ill health who don't have a diagnosis. So, from there - and I think this is really key - when we talk about the challenges, 'challenges' and 'challenging behaviour' have become quite generic, broad terms, and I don't think we really define what they are, and that's part of the reason for having a conversation like this, because educators need particularly to have these conversations in a structured and positive way. So, we're talking about managing those challenging situations where perhaps the behaviours are outside the norms or the typical scope of students experiencing mental ill health that we would commonly see in our student population. For the purposes of today I am absolutely assuming that we are applying reasonable adjustments, that it is a process that's already in place and being reviewed, and that the teaching practice is inclusive. Yet despite those things, there would appear to still be an inability to meet the requirements or to conform to what we could call the expected behaviours, the participation that's required to be successful and the engagement that's required. So, that's what we're talking about by 'challenging'. And there's many observations that we can actually make. I'm just going to share a few of them, because I do think this is really important because it applies not just to educators but to the support services staff, to our front counter customer services, to faculty administration staff. You may have had some of these experiences yourself, and this is not exhaustive, but it's certainly common within my organisation. At the inquiry stage, we tend to see an individual that makes repeated phone or email inquiries. Many, many presentations and to an admin, counsellor or customer service centre. And the inquiries don't quite fit. They can sometimes come across as demands. We sometimes see an extraordinary series of repetitive enrolments and withdrawal. We've sometimes seen a student enrol in the morning, by lunchtime they've withdrawn, in the afternoon they've enrolled again and in the evening they've called the customer service centre to withdraw. That clearly should flag to us something is not well. We sometimes see very, very contradictory requests, and by that I mean a student has submitted multiple applications for study, but those applications are for civil engineering, hospitality, animal care - completely scattergun approach. And if very genuinely we have that person's details, I would encourage our customer service staff to actually have a look in our systems and see has this student studied with us before, has this person been with us before? Because in many instances what we can see is actually a very long history of enrolments and withdrawal with virtually no completion. And when I say 'completion' I don't mean a course that's not been completed. Quite literally units of study or even assessments have not been completed. So, it does speak somewhat to an inability to tolerate uncertainty, that there's a certain level of distress, and clearly something is not quite right. It actually presents us with an opportunity to have a very positive intervention conversation. Once we get past that enrolment stage, if that's progressed, sometimes at the very early stages of study, at start of study, particularly in the first term, these are just some examples of what we see and what our educators will tell us. We see somebody with very irregular or sporadic attendance, and when they do attend they just don't seem to be in a position to participate. Sometimes when they attend and literally walk in halfway through a lecture or a class there's a lack of awareness that the classes have already commenced and we see what I personally call a little bit of a performance in getting their belongings out and settling down into the class. So, there's very little awareness sometimes, and I'm making some general statements I know. Interestingly, though, despite some of those attendance issues, even where there's minimal attendance, we get a huge amount of communication via email, and it's something that I call the lengthy late-night email, and you may have received these. This is when you open your email as a staff member in the morning and you have maybe an email that is quite literally pages and pages long from an individual or four, five, six emails in the early hours of the night, and sometimes it's nothing actually to do with our organisation or our course and it's an outpouring of emotion, and we can imagine that there's an individual sat there at a keyboard or tapping away on their device and all of that emotion is coming out. We sometimes see that very demanding behaviour, particularly to teachers. 'Why won't you help me? You haven't covered this. You haven't taught this.' Now many years ago I was a teacher, and it's a challenge to your integrity and your values, and it's very difficult if you're stood there in front of 30-40 students who all know themselves that you're being challenged that you haven't taught a piece of content, yet you haven't seen the student for three weeks and they've not attended and that's actually when you've been teaching this content. We sometimes see those very heightened emotions. As I say, it's not exhaustive, but this is some of the feedback and the observation that we get from staff. Maybe you've seen some of this. I think it's fair to say that we then ask the question, well, what's actually the function of this type of behaviour? And really it's engaging in a way that it's the teacher that's not delivered this. It's the organisation that hasn't done this. And in a way the individual is almost protecting themselves, because it's not them that's failing here, it's not them that's not being successful, it's actually everybody else. And it's challenging to manage that. So, of course, it doesn't take long until we have to have a conversation. And my experience and the experience of the teachers that I talk to and I work with is that often there seems to be very little insight or recognition of the very genuine concerns that we're raising. Sometimes I've actually said 'I'm really concerned here because you haven't been to any of these classes, you've not been to any of these Tuesday classes this semester', and I've had a student say to me, 'Yes, I have', and you're sort of in a very strange position where you're like, 'But you haven't. What's not being recognised here?' Sometimes teachers say, 'Well, I've raised this concern with the student and they've just completely dismissed it. Why do you mention it? I've moved on, you need to move on.' Or somebody who is actually completely failing in their studies who says, 'Oh, it's okay, I'll just continue', as if there's no concern there at all; it just doesn't seem to be important. And I think a number of staff ‑ I know I've experienced this, when you've tried to communicate with a student who feels very angry or frustrated with the organisation, or maybe with an individual staff member and you think, 'Well, hang on, we haven't actually done anything wrong here. What's happening? What's happening in this space?' I do like to have the conversation around abilities and limitations, and the impression that we sometimes get, because we tend to see people who would appear to be quite independent in many ways. They either live independently or are essentially young adults who live independently maybe in a family home. They can access services; they don't need support people to get around and take part in the community. They can complete enrolment processes, yet it does appear that sometimes there is considerable frustration or a difficulty understanding what we would consider to be actually quite straightforward information. I wonder how many of you have met with one of the students who has these challenges yet is wonderfully articulate, is clearly very intelligent and, boy, are they brilliant at nailing you down with some facts. I've certainly had those experiences. So, I do like to remind our educators, when we're trying to understand what's actually happening here, mental ill health is not an intellectual impairment. This is not somebody with an intellectual impairment. This is somebody who, because of their complex mental ill health, is having disruption to their thoughts and to their thinking and to their behaviours. I like to be very honest when I describe this. I think the more complex and challenging mental ill health and sometimes multiple mental ill health is actually wickedly cruel. It really is a terrible, terrible thing for an individual to experience. So, we find ourselves in these situations where normally we may have a conversation about, why is it that the student does not seem to be able to focus on their studies; they don't seem to be able to maintain their attention. In these situations we're not actually getting to that point. We're finding that the individual is actually unable to commence even the simplest of tasks and activities to even begin to engage in study let alone getting to the point of maintaining. They're not getting started. And of course, particularly in my organisation, the majority of our programs you want people to engage with others. It's not about being a friend with everyone, but you need to be able to conform, for want of a better word, on some level with those people around you. So there's very, very significant limitations. That's what's being presented. Yet isn't it interesting that, despite some of those limitations, we often see someone who has an incredible level of energy to pursue a complaint or a grievance. However, we may disagree with the basis of that complaint or grievance. Sometimes multiple complaints and grievances. And it's only natural that we think to ourselves, 'Hang on a minute. We've got all of this energy going into this, but we just don't seem to be able to get you to put anything into a simple activity to commence your studies.' So, it is challenging. It is challenging for teachers particularly, and for our support services. I do remind our teachers in these situations - and it's as much for our own wellbeing - we can't address or right the wrongs in people's lives that are outside the scope of our business and delivering the program of study. We're also not here to endure any ongoing unacceptable behaviour. We're really not. We're certainly not here in my organisation to diagnose mental health. I say to our educators, you'll likely never know what's really going on. You can only work with what you know and what's presented to you in the environment that we are in. And sometimes it is perfectly understandable and quite natural, based on our experience, to fully expect an individual to fail. But make sure that you're giving them every opportunity. Revisit the adjustments, if they're in place, or raise them with the individual. But it's okay based on your teaching experience to think, this is not going to work. So, part of those things that we need to do and we talk about, really, here are very straightforward. We must be that consistency. We must be that consistent, calm individual. And our teachers, from my organisation, are hugely invested in their students as our support staff are, and across all of our student services, but you cannot become dragged into those side issues. You can't get caught up in that student storm. You've got to keep the messaging on track so that the student knows the conversations that they're having with you are about study. I'm a great believer in addressing concerns sooner rather than later, because particularly in these instances, if it's somebody that's just not participating in a way that's acceptable, it's not going to magically go away, and it will continue. As I've said, we're already assuming that we're applying reasonable adjustments, and if things aren't working we're reviewing them. And very importantly for staff, our wellbeing, because these can be challenging. It's important to maintain boundaries as a practitioner, both individually and importantly as a team. I know that one of the counsellors in my organisation refers to splitting behaviours, because we will sometimes see a student with huge challenges who will try to reach into one staff member, 'You're the only one that understands me, you're the only one that helps me.' As a team, if you're a teaching team or a support team, you do just have to be aware of that behaviour. As I say, I do advise when a student has crossed the line in any situation, whether it's mental health or any other, because people need to know where the line is and what's acceptable in your environment and your workplace. Now, interestingly, though, for all of these challenges it's very difficult to understand what it's like for a student unless you've got that personal experience. So, as best we can, if you think about a time when you have felt particularly aggrieved, when maybe you were ripped off or treated badly, a time when you felt really hard done by, one of those occasions that kept you awake at night, when those thoughts were ruminating and you probably would have said to yourself or out loud, 'What's difficult about this? This is just wrong. Why don't people understand this? Why is it so difficult?', and those emotions are very strong, very powerful and they're very real. And, of course, these are the emotions that the student is experiencing. Whether we think they're right/wrong in their grievances and complaints, the way they're conducting themselves, their emotions are very real. And that actually just adds a whole other level of stress and anxiety on to the individual's existing symptoms of their mental ill health. So, we can understand that a person may be just not in a position to see the reasoning no matter how well we articulate that, and yet you've got someone who can see their peers progressing, going to employment, going to university, having personal relationships, getting a job, and yet for the individual, 'Why can't I do this? Why is everyone blocking this from happening for me?' Because of course they're not in a position to influence their mental ill health. It is disrupting their thoughts, their emotions, their behaviours, and I'll say it again, it's a horribly cruel experience for the individual and it is physically and mentally exhausting, and it will cause, as I say, other levels of anxiety and confusion, and sometimes just absolute fear. Terrible situation to be in. And we do just have to remind ourselves of that, when sometimes we're being confronted by someone who is challenging our values and integrity. It doesn't excuse it, but it helps have some understanding. I think that's a really important message that we need to get across. So, how do we manage these conversations? How do we do that? Well, the informal conversations - for me it's simply being explicit and brief. What's required? And give people a timeframe. Because, frankly, for any student, if you don't give them a timeframe is it going to happen? Be explicit. You have to keep bringing that conversation back to the task at hand. 'I'm here to talk to you about this unit of study. That is what I can do for you.' I encourage staff, don't over explain things. As we all know, sometimes if we can see somebody who doesn't appear to have quite understood or processed what we've said, we feel obliged to re‑explain, and it's actually a time to get comfortable with that silence. Give the individual the time to process what's been said. Because if we over explain all we're doing is giving more words and more terminology to process and it's not actually helpful. I'm going to use a very real example from quite recently in my organisation when a student through email communication - and I'm going to talk about that a bit more in a moment - hugely emotional, demanding emails to a teacher. And I can tell you that teacher was bending over backwards to help that student. And in a reply that teacher said, 'I'm sorry this is causing you stress.' What the student read in that statement was, 'Oh, so you are causing my stress. You admit that you're causing my stress.' Sometimes we've just got to be a little mindful of what we say. I encourage you, you must keep copies of your notes and your communication. Very, very important. Now, because the email seems to be a way that a lot of individuals communicate, I will say very clearly to our educators, you actually don't have to respond to a rant. You don't have to respond to an outpouring of emotion. I can tell you the student many years ago who was very angry about crime in the community here in Brisbane and would send me huge, huge emails about crime statistics and opinions and 'your organisation should do this'. It was nothing to do with us. I didn't respond to those. We only really need to respond if there is something in there that is a threat or implied, and more often than not it will be about harm to that individual themselves rather than to a staff member. That needs to be progressed and actioned urgently, whether it goes to a counsellor or to your manager to reach out to that individual. Unless there is some other quite specific action or request that's being made, but we don't need to reply to somebody literally having an outpouring, we really don't. You do need to keep copies of that kind of communication, though. I also say to teachers, you don't actually have to justify the teaching and learning process. This is actually what we're here for. If somebody wants to challenge me or question me on why we're studying something or why is a piece of assessment like this, that's fine, but there are ways of going about it. If I have to give some direction on how I would like that done so be it, but I'm not going to get into a conversation to justify why we're teaching the program that we are. After all, this is what the individual has actually chosen to enrol into. So, when it comes to having the meeting and we're moving into that more formal space, I'm often asked about this, having done it many times myself: how do you go about this? And I think most of you will be doing this already. But it's good to hear from someone else just confirming the steps. I can tell you right now I will not arrange a meeting about a student's progress or lack of progress or some other issue unless I am absolutely prepared. I will say to that faculty, 'I want the attendance records. I want the bang up‑to‑date picture of assessments, what's been done/what hasn't been done. I want any copies of grievances or complaints that the student has submitted. I want anything that the teacher has previously reported.' Because I want to put together a documented timeline and I want to be absolutely clear that I'm being as fair as I can to that student. And if for any reason I don't feel comfortable meeting that student on my own, then I meet with a colleague. I don't need any reason whatsoever to validate why I want a colleague to attend. If I'm just not comfortable, that's good enough and that's what I say to everybody else. I do have a wry smile when I reach out to that student to arrange a time. I always have a copy of their timetable, because it's amazing when you're trying to pin someone down how unavailable they are and they're never available until the last Thursday of the month. Well, guess what? I'm looking at your timetable. You're in class three days a week. You're available. Firm but fair is the way you need to go. And in these conversations, in these meetings - and there are different types of meetings of course - you set the scene, you keep it brief, you keep it factual. But sometimes you've got to be prepared for some deflection and some deviation, and you have to be quite firm in bringing that conversation back to why the meeting is being called, because we're trying to get a positive outcome. And if you are prepared, as I would be, I can address any absolutely false or inaccurate statements. I need to, because this is the conversation we need to have. I'm trying to close things down that have been said before that are simply not the case, and whether I need to state what the expectations are, I'll do that. And the actions from these conversations need to be followed up as soon as possible. Now, sometimes we talk about these meetings because they're not the conversations that people want to have, because they're a bit of a test. They're a challenge. They can be difficult, and I'll say to my colleagues, well, prepare for the conversation so that you are being as fair as possible to the student, but also as fair as possible to yourself and what we're here for. So, as a staff member when you've had that conversation - and it might not be a particularly pleasant conversation; it might not go well in the sense that the student might just say, "I've heard enough of this", and they up and walk out. You must discharge your own stress from that. Debrief with a colleague and a manager. As I said earlier, you must step back from that student storm. Even if that meeting doesn't go particularly well in terms of the outcome that you would have liked, give yourself some credit for actually managing the situation and for having the conversation and for dealing with it. I always say some simple questions, both before a conversation like that and afterwards. In the context of what we're doing in the context of the course, have we applied any adjustments that we're required and was it reviewed, was that whole consultation process done as it should have been? Have we provided this student with ample opportunity to be successful? After all, that's what we're here for. And is there anything that was not addressed? They're not easy conversations, but they're conversations we need to have. Now, I don't know about your organisation, but we're a very large organisation across Queensland and we have a whole library of policies and procedures. Can I tell you, a lot of staff don't know where they are. And you have to remind people where to find things. So, we remind our staff, 'You've said to me you've got these concerns. Have you actually followed our process? Because if you haven't, essentially nothing has progressed, regardless of what concerns you have.' So, we're very mindful that, while people know we've got a behaviour management framework or a misconduct report, we've also got a student intervention plan, which is actually a really positive conversation that you can have with a student, and document it so that you can raise your concerns with the student, and simply say, 'In our experience, this is what a successful student looks like at this point in the program. This is where you are. How are we going to help you to get there? What is it that you're going to do now that can be different?', and we'll give that advice and guidance. Because if you're not having those really honest conversations, you're not addressing the issue. Sometimes people are a bit fearful of those, but more often than not they are the most useful tool that you have, and if that's your process that's what you need to be doing. I even show people the documents. I know there are some misconduct procedures there, but it's the one on the right for me. It's the intervention plan. This is what I'm offering to you, and you're getting hopefully some participation in that. If not, well that's something you need to document. When we talked earlier about being in the student's shoes as much as we can, I think it's important to show this very brief slide that I don't need to talk to as such. I'm not going to read through it, but you can see the clinical language here from the DSM about the range of mental disorders. All those coloured boxes on the right, you're not supposed to be able to read it. The print is far too small. The point of this is that, as we get frustrated with somebody who is presenting us with these very challenging situations, just remind ourselves it's one thing to get a relatively simple diagnosis of anxiety or depression, but once you get into the much more complex mental ill health that takes many appointments over an extended period of time, and given everything we know about the mental ill health and the disruption to a person's thinking, thoughts, behaviours, I'll be blunt and say it's a bloody miracle that some people actually get a diagnosis at all let alone then access an appropriate treatment plan or supports. Even if that individual has family and friends around them, it's a miracle it happens sometimes and it's very understandable why sometimes it does not happen at all. So, go back to the beginning. We're not talking about the huge number of students that are predicted to expect some mental health challenges. We're not spending our time today going through what all those reasonable adjustments might be. In communication with this very small number of students, reduce the number of people involved, because often they'll be reaching out to different people at the same time. It's not uncommon to find that, whilst you're responding to an inquiry, four, five, six other people across the business are replying to the same person. It's not helpful. Close the communication down to one individual. And when we look to the future in these situations, it is highly likely that the student will either have to defer, withdraw or is withdrawn. Maybe they'll be able to continue in some form of reduced study load. Sadly, sometimes not the case. Whatever the communication and the steps, records and notes you must maintain. And this is something that I was in two minds whether to talk to. I can tell you that in a very, very small number of instances where we have had a student enrol, enrol, enrol again and again and again with absolutely no successful outcome whatsoever, we've intervened and put an indicator on that student's account so that we will not simply just progress yet another enrolment, unless that student is prepared to engage with us and have a conversation about, 'Let's do this differently.' It's not an exclusion and it's not a block in the sense that they can never study again. Far from it. I think we have an obligation as an organisation to actually intervene where there is a proven track record, and we don't go down the same road again. I think we have that obligation to the student. I think in some of the most challenging situations you'll always have all of those urban myths going around, and I'll only touch on a couple. You do have to remind colleagues and staff that people experiencing chronic mental ill health are far more likely to be the victims of crime, physical and financial crime. Some of the media headlines, as we know, are just truly horrendous. If you want to know what's behind violence in any shape or form in Australia, it's alcohol by a long, long way - far more than any other drug. And of course, as I'm sure some of you have been thinking, hang on a minute, these behaviours can occur in all people, not just people experiencing mental ill health, and you're dead right. Yes, they absolutely can. But for all the talk in recent years about what is mental health, what's mental ill health, I just don't feel that we're having the conversations that educators need. 'How do I manage this? What am I supposed to do here?' Because it really, really does test you. And remember that as a teacher and an educator there's only you and your class. Nobody else is seeing what you're experiencing. So, in my organisation we've taken a much bigger focus more recently, a much more structured focus on how do we support our staff. We're fortunate that we have an employee assistance program, we're fortunate that we have done a whole series of professional development throughout the year and will continue to do so. We're making much bigger strides into ensuring that as many staff as possible, particularly teachers, have up‑to‑date mental health first aid, and we have a real encouraging focus on collegial support. Teachers and support staff need to talk to each other about these challenges and see how each other is managing it, and be that support for each other. We're fortunate that we've also put out this year to over 5,000 staff a wellbeing and resilience program to every single staff member across Queensland called Mindarma. It's nothing to do with students and managing students, it's about health and wellbeing and resilience as an individual. So, I appreciate I've covered quite a bit there. We were never going to cover every situation/scenario. How could we possibly? But I think you'll find that, if you have these conversations, your educators will be very, very receptive, because they want to know what works.

DARREN BRITTEN: Thanks for listening to this ADCET podcast. We hope that you learned something new about making tertiary education more accessible and inclusive for students with disability. You can keep up to date with our future webinars and podcasts by signing up for our fortnightly newsletter at our website: adcet.edu.au/newsletter.

Thanks again for listening to this podcast from the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training. Supporting you, supporting students.