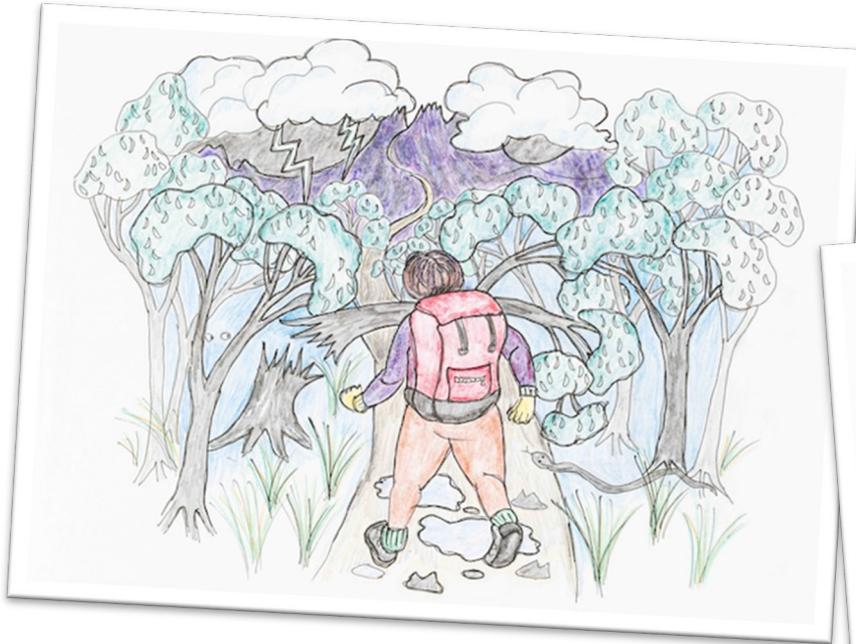


“Falling between the cracks?” Experiences of university students with mental health challenges



Dr Nicole Crawford

ADCET presentation, 10th October 2022

Today's plan

1. Provide some background info about:
 - a. the larger research project
 - b. student mental wellbeing
2. Present some preliminary findings around students' experiences of support for mental health challenges
 - a. in particular, from the student interviews
 - b. think about what helps and hinders students
3. What can we do?



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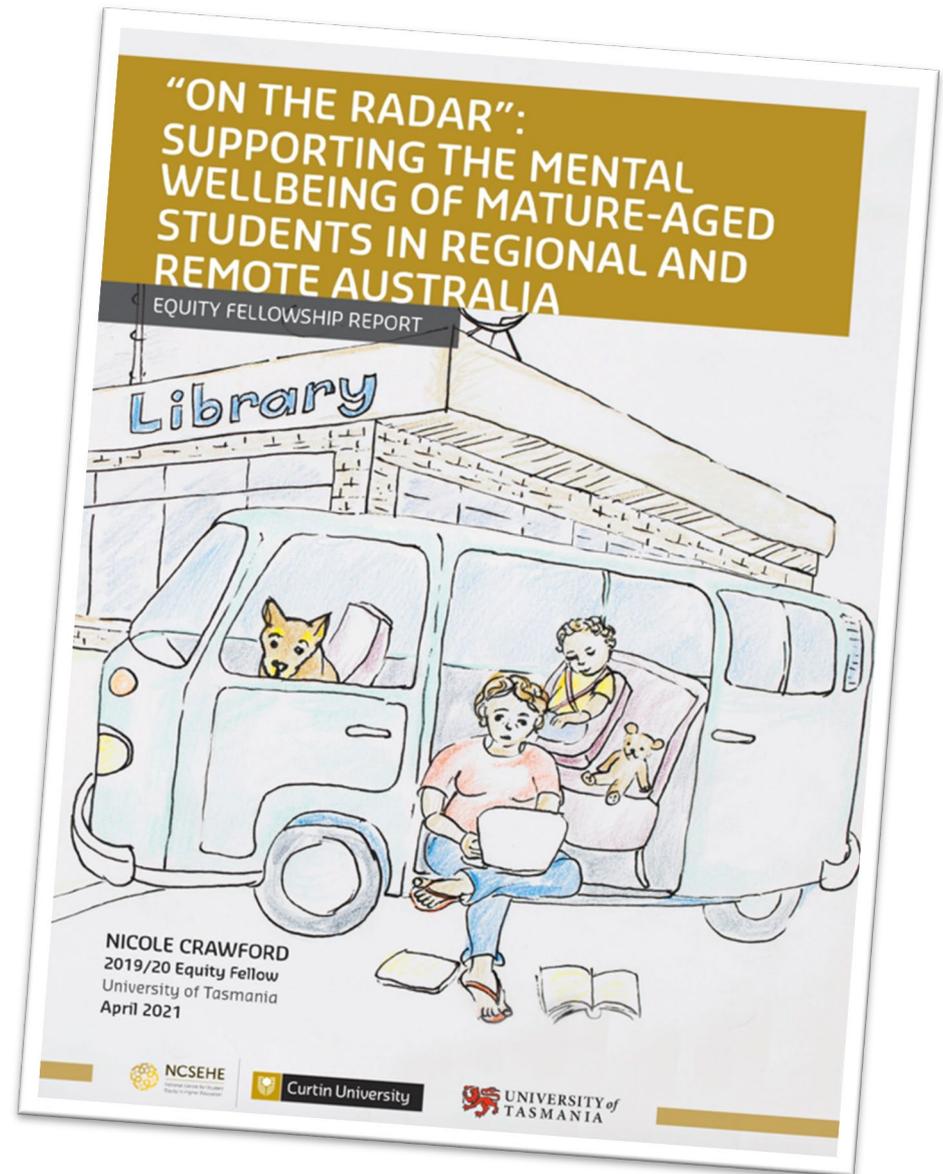


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2019/20 NCSEHE Equity Fellowship

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

- Mixed methods
- Data collection
 - National data
 - Student Survey (n=1,800)
 - Student Interviews (n=51)



University students' mental ill-health

- Numerous studies and reports have highlighted the prevalence of mental ill-health in university student populations; some have also found that levels of psychological distress are higher than for the general population (Caleb & Barden, 2019; Larcombe et al., 2016; Leahy et al., 2010; Orygen, 2017; Rickwood et al., 2017; Stallman, 2010; van Agteren et al., 2019).
- In other studies, psychological distress was measured at different times during a course and it was found that students' distress levels worsened across their degree (Bewick et al., 2010).
- Poor mental health has been found to impact on learning outcomes, attrition rates
 - E.g. Zajac et al. (2022) found that pre-existing poor mental health adversely affected student attrition in the first year.



Current context: university student mental health

- Recent reports/projects in Australia
 - Baik et al. (2016, 2017)
 - Orygen (2017, 2020)
 - Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) (2018) – Recommendation 8
- International blueprints/approaches/frameworks/research
 - Okanagan Charter (2015)
 - UK: University Mental Health Charter (2019); SMaRteN; Education for Mental Health project

[Holistic, institution-wide, settings approaches]



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Defining mental wellbeing

For the purpose of the research, I 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)

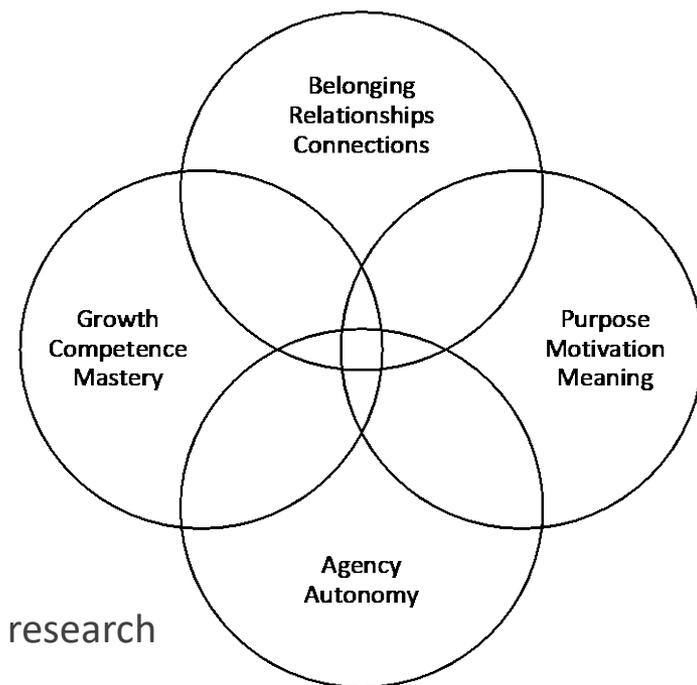
Acknowledging that there are numerous definitions of mental health and models of wellbeing, my research is informed by the following:

- The WHO’s definition
- MacKean’s (2011) dual-continuum model
- Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-determination

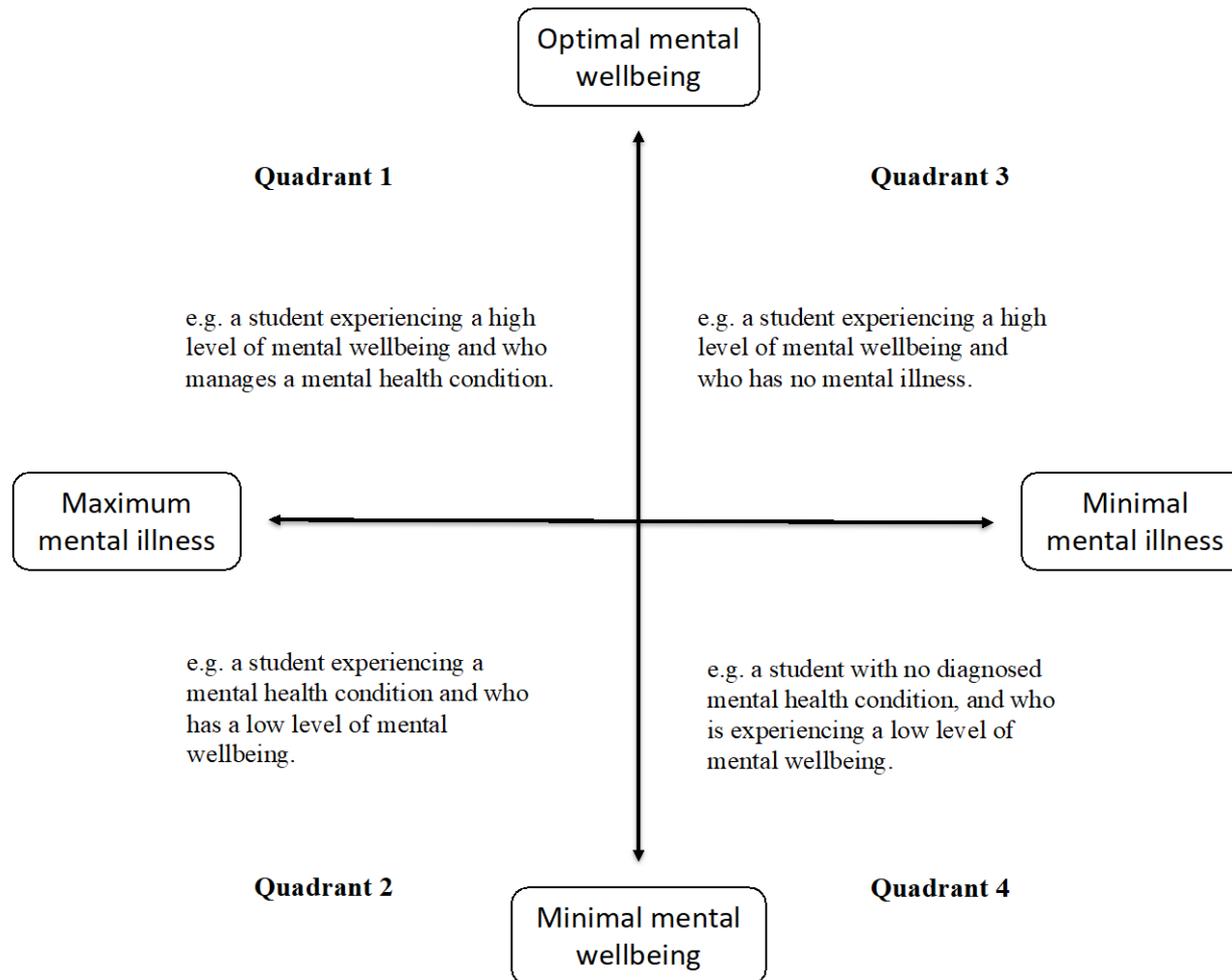
theory and adaptations of it for higher education,

including:

- Baik et al. (2016a, 2016c)
- Woodyatt (2019, 2020)
- Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory also informs this research



The dual continuum model



Classifications and (formal) support provision

- Disability - classifications
 - In 2021, “mental health condition” became one of the categories under the umbrella category, “Disability”.
- Support provision in universities for students with mental health challenges
 - **Disability/Accessibility units** (also go by other names, such as Access Centre, Wellbeing ...)
To be eligible to access these types of services (for a mental health challenge), it’s usually the case that students would need to provide evidence of a diagnosed mental health condition. Supports include learning access plans (and equivalent).
 - **Counselling Services**
It’s usually the case that all students can access counselling services (whether they have a diagnosed mental health condition or not).



Characteristics of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia



- Compared to metro areas, higher % of students in regional & remote areas are:
 - Older
 - Female
 - From low socio-economic status areas
 - Studying online
 - Studying part-time
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Live in RR areas (rather than re-locate for study);
- Commitments: children, caring, work, community...
- First-in-family
- Diverse cohort with widely varying circumstances

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 five reasons why they considered withdrawing or deferring:
 - “stress”
 - “feeling overwhelmed with their university study-load”
 - mental health difficulties
 - couldn't fit study in with their other commitments
 - financial difficulties



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Informal supports: staff and students

Statement (in the Student Survey)	Strongly agree/agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Strongly disagree/disagree (%)	Does not apply to me (%)
1. I have at least one person (staff or student) who I can turn to at university for support.	54.7	12.9	31.1	1.3
2. I have a supportive peer group (face-to-face or online) at university.	33.0	17.1	46.7	3.2

[Reference: Table 7 in Crawford (2021, p. 59).]

Now to this exploration of the experiences of students with mental health challenges

Why?

1. Responses to questions in the student survey
2. From my experience teaching in enabling education (e.g. uni preparation programs)

How?

1. Returned to some quant. questions in the Student Survey, which then prompted a return to the qual data – i.e. the 51 interview transcripts and open-ended survey questions.



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Two questions of particular interest (in the anonymous online student survey)

1. Do you have a disability?

- 1,785 survey respondents
- 12.1 % (n=216) answered “yes”.

2. Do you have a diagnosed mental health condition?

- 1,787 survey respondents
- 31 % (n=554) answered “yes”.



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Quote from a research participant: Todd

“I could see that I was supported, right from the beginning of my, starting my degree. I could see that there were things in place that would allow me to progress the way I have and allow me to expand my life the way it is, but also to bounce back and keep going without too many problems.”

(Todd; male; 51-60; Inner Regional; online; Fine Arts)



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Quote from a research participant: Joanna

“So, I registered with Disability services, because I didn’t actually know whether I would be able to sit in a lecture room at that stage. I couldn’t even walk to the letterbox to collect the mail on some days. So, basically, what it ended up being was just support for exams. I have my exams in a room on my own. I don’t go into the big hallways with everybody else. That has been fantastic. The staff that they have in that area are brilliant.”

(Joanna; female; 41-50; Inner Regional; on-campus; Science)



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Quote from a research participant: David

“I made a comment on the forum that one of the assignments was doing my head in a bit, and the tutor sent me an email saying, ‘Is that a colloquialism, or are you suffering from some mental health issues?’ and I said, ‘Well, I do suffer from depression.’ So, gave me all the contacts for the [University] mental health sections... He has been very, very helpful in keeping my head grounded when I’ve had issues with the lecturers .”

(David; male; 41-50; Outer Regional; online; Arts)



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Quote from a research participant: Andrea

“And so I was just lucky enough to run into my English tutor, who I built a really lovely rapport with, and she just happened to say to me, you know, ‘Is everything okay today?’ and I was, like, ‘No, it’s not’... And then she was the one that steered me towards ... the coordinator of disabilities, and I remember saying to my tutor ‘Oh, but I don’t have a disability,’ and she goes, ‘Well, you kind of do but it’s a mental health one.’ ... that’s when uni life became a bit more doable for me...”

(Andrea; female; 51-60; Outer Regional; on-campus; Nursing)



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Quote from a research participant: Ursula

“[A staff member at the regional campus] said, ‘You need to contact the student wellbeing people and you need to get an access plan,’ I’m going, ‘Whoa, whoa, what is all this?’ That actually led to me being ... recognised I had a condition that was impacting on my study, ... So yeah, but those six months were definitely impacting on my studies, you could see it on my grades. But then again, [the University] was quite helpful. I’d never heard about this student wellbeing access centre, had no idea. That was really awesome of them to do that.”

(Ursula; female; 51-60; Outer Regional; on-campus; Social Work)



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Quote from a research participant: Beverley

“Yeah, I’m aware of them [university supports]. I haven’t actually taken advantage of them because I’ve got my own support mechanisms set up in my life. So, I haven’t really looked there. In the odd subject, if there’s been a little bit of an issue from the mental health side of it or something, I’ve just contacted the tutor and said, ‘Look, I’m feeling this is a bit challenging,’ or whatever, and there’s been no problems with supporting me in that way.”

(Beverley; female; 61-70; Outer Regional; online; Design)



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Quote from a research participant: Bridget

“So I got really anxious, I got very, very anxious at that point.”

“But anyway, so what I ended up having to do was cancel a few social things and took sleeping tablets ... so I slept through the day. And then I got up early, like 5 o'clock in the afternoon, and left home, left [my partner] with the kids, and went into work and just worked [on the assignments] from 6 o'clock in the evening 'till 10 o'clock at night when I start work. And I actually managed to get my assignment in working in those four hours prior to work, if that makes sense. That was the only way I could do it. And actually I was pretty impressed with myself because [laughs] I didn't know I could do it.”

(Bridget; female; 41-50; Outer Regional; online; Psychology)

Quote from a research participant: Julie

“And he [the counsellor] gave me great strategies for time management, because he could see I was just struggling enormously and that’s where I needed to begin. And to focus on what was the first priority I needed to do, and it was to get this, just one assignment, in. They gave me extensions for the two weeks. They told me I could apply and get the four weeks. But there was no way I was going to do that. Because once I got help, I was back, you know. I knew what I had to do and, again, I think husband understood more. It was another catalyst for going, ‘this is hard’. And me saying I will never do four units again. And you know, this term I’m going to do three and I’ll be curious to see how I manage.”

(Julie; female; 41-50; Inner Regional; on-campus; Education)



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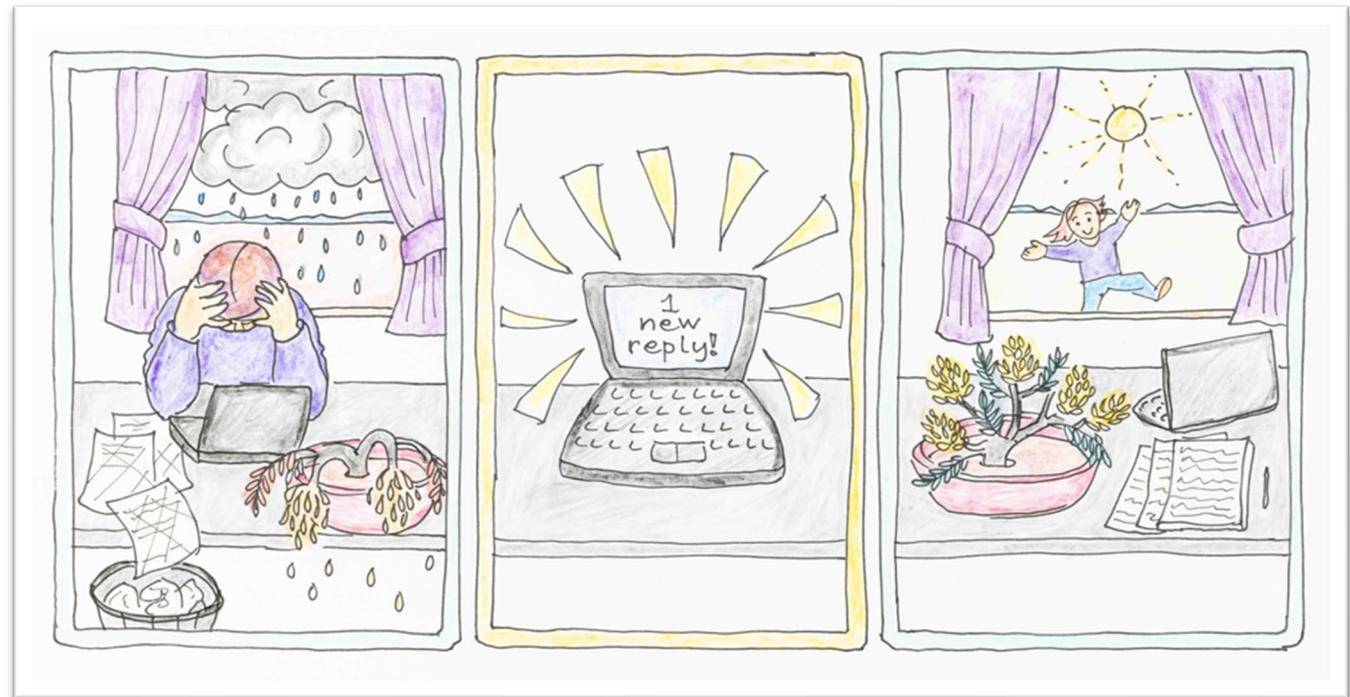
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The role of staff: relatively small actions make a big difference

1. David: his tutor sent him an email, checking in, in response to a comment he made on a forum
2. Andrea: her English tutor, with whom she had “built a really lovely rapport” asked the question: “Is everything ok today?”
3. Ursula: A staff member told her about the relevant uni services
4. Julie: “And he [the counsellor] gave me great strategies for time management”



In regard to students with a mental health condition: What are some barriers to getting support?

1. Not being aware of supports
2. Not being aware of the classifications around disability and mental health
3. Not identifying mental ill-health with disability
4. The need to disclose – [lots to explore here] – time required; not trusting where info goes in the uni – who sees it?; where does it get stored? (Clark et al., 2018; Grimes et al., 2019)
5. Stigma
6. The time it can take to get diagnosed – to get the relevant paperwork; the lengthy admin process to access supports



In regard to students with a mental health condition: What helps?

1. Awareness of support
2. The Disability/Accessibility services
3. Staff (tutors, lecturers, librarians and more) – e.g. noticing and referring students to the relevant services

In regard to *all* students (with a mental health challenge - whether it's diagnosed or not): What are some barriers? challenges?

1. Some students find it difficult to ask for help – thinking they need to be able to manage by themselves (especially mature-aged, regional/remote students)
2. Students unaware of support services (staff also might be unaware of supports – e.g. who can access which supports)
3. Not understanding the expectations of uni and the workload (e.g. what does being enrolled in 4 units actually mean?)

In regard to *all* students: What helps?

1. Teaching staff and professional staff (lecturers, tutors, librarians ...)
 - a. Referring students to the relevant services
 - b. Noticing, checking in with students
 - c. Importance of trust and having a rapport
2. Counselling services
3. Other services within University Student Support Services – e.g. Academic learning support – in helping students with time management, breaking down tasks ...
4. Raising awareness of services (e.g. of academic learning support; counselling etc.)
 - a. Reminders about services at different times – students get info overload during Orientation
5. Having realistic expectations of uni, being prepared for uni



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What does this all mean?

1. The figures I mentioned earlier – (12.1 % reporting disability and 31% reporting a mental health condition) suggests there are large numbers of students who are not receiving supports they are likely to be eligible for. PLUS, there is another group of students who fall between the cracks – students with undiagnosed mental health challenges.

2. Support provision is complex and multi-faceted
 - a. Disability/Accessibility Services and Counselling Services can't do it all.

3. Academic and professional staff play a very important role. E.g. staff who who know the student, have trust and rapport – in the context of teaching and support



What can we (staff “on the ground”) do?

We all have a role to play – large or small:

1. Inclusive teaching practices; flexibility
2. Teaching and professional staff – guide/refer students to our university’s Student Support Services
3. Teaching and professional staff – proactive approaches

But how? For practical examples:

- a. Refer to “On the radar” report Guidelines for specific examples
- b. Refer to “Guides for staff” – fourth guide



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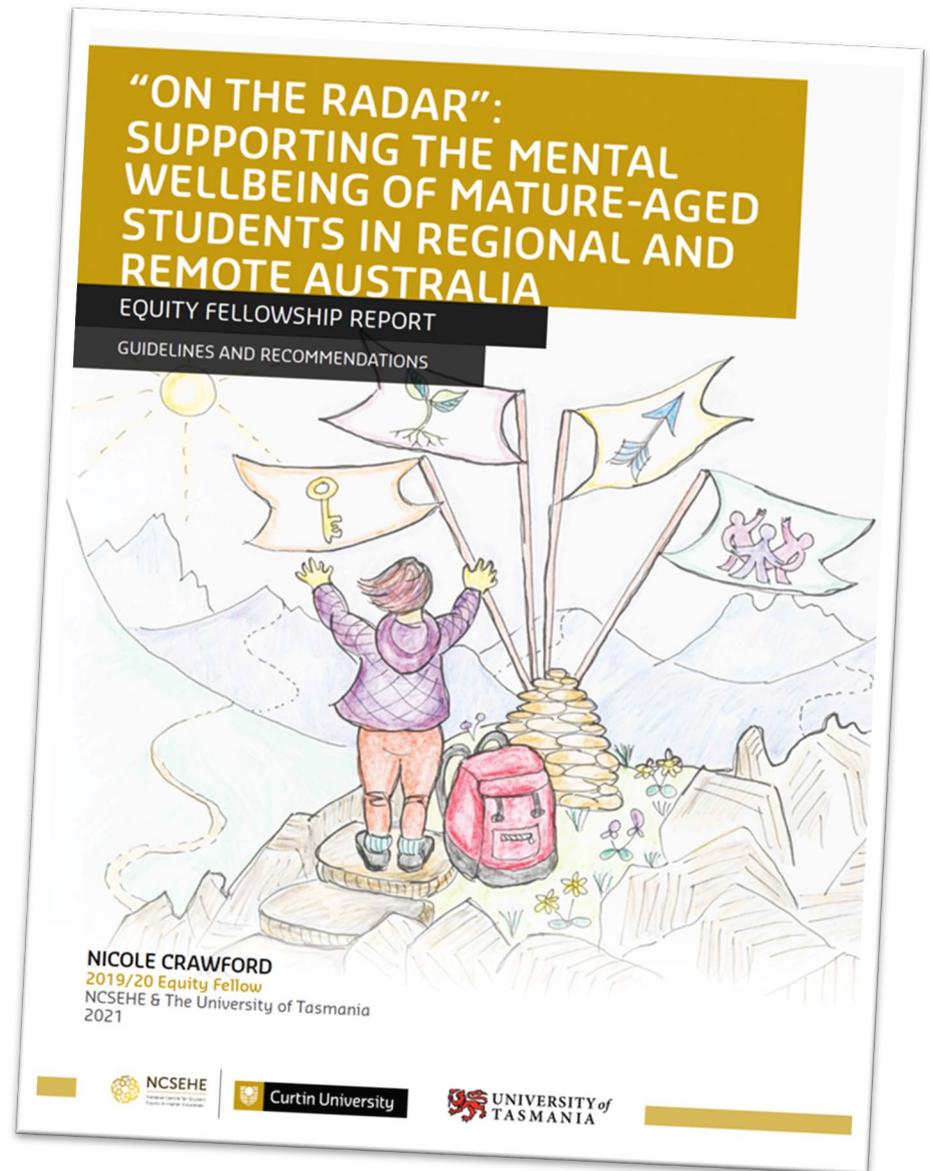


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Resource to check out: “On the radar” - Guidelines & Recs

Available on the NCSEHE website:
<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/student-mental-wellbeing-guidelines-staff-universities/>

The Guidelines include examples of proactive approaches you could try.



Guidelines for staff: proactive approaches

1. Know your students: understand their diverse challenges, commitments and strengths.
2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring.
3. Implement principles of inclusive education and/or universal design in the curriculum.
4. Consider students' online environment in course and curriculum design, and delivery.
5. Facilitate student interactions and connections.
6. Provide pre-university transition or preparation courses and specific orientation events.
7. Consider students' practical challenges: assessment deadlines, timetabling, placements, internet access and natural disasters.
8. Raise awareness of the full range of university services that support students.
9. Ensure Student Support Services are responsive to student diversity and inclusive of all students.



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For example, let's look at one of the guidelines – Number 2

2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring.

How?

- Huge class? [For lecturers], Consider posting a short (2 min) video of yourself to sum up the week and what's coming up next week
- Small class? Consider phoning ...

Proactive approaches

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—say once a semester—particularly with the students who cannot make synchronous sessions. You could make a point of emailing the group to forewarn them that lecturer/tutor A, B, C plans to call them at a certain time that week. The students will likely have questions and be extremely grateful for your call; leave a message if they don't answer — they'll be chuffed that you care. Alternatively, consider recording a short (two-minute) video at the end of the week—summing up the week's focus and introducing the next topic (a few times per semester, especially around assessment time)—it is a way to check in with large numbers of students, and for online students to see you.



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Resource to check out: Short intro guides for staff

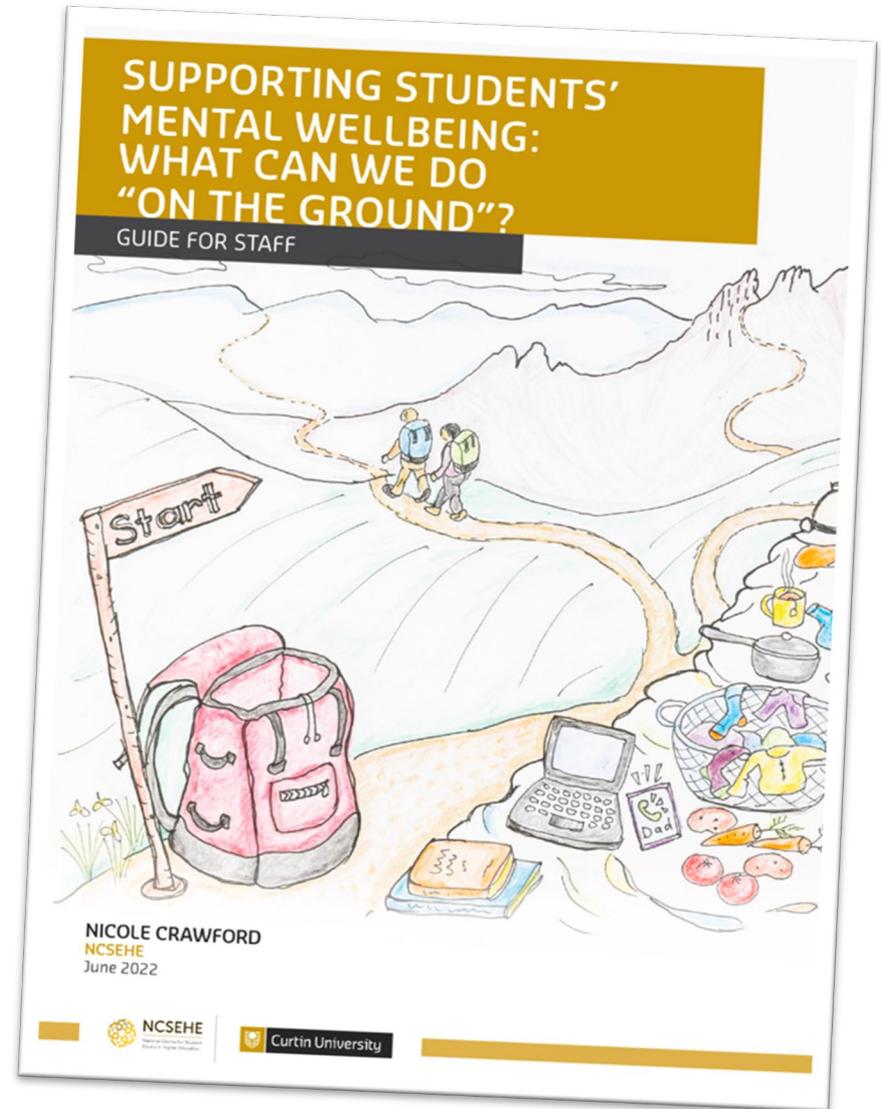
Available on the NCSEHE website:
<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/staff-guides-student-equity-support/>

The fourth guide is about supporting students' mental wellbeing.



Guides for staff on student equity, and supporting students' learning and mental wellbeing

Dr Nicole Crawford
NCSEHE Senior Research Fellow



What can we (staff “on the ground”) do? (continued)

We all have a role to play – large or small:

1. Inclusive teaching practices; flexibility
2. Teaching and professional staff – guide/refer students to our university’s Student Support Services
3. Teaching and professional staff – proactive approaches

But how? For practical examples:

- a. Refer to “On the radar” report Guidelines for specific examples
- b. Refer to “Guides for staff” – fourth guide

But how? (continued):

Learn from each other – e.g teaching staff can learn from uni counsellors, Disability/Accessibility advisors, NDCOs and vice versa; collaborate; share ideas; create a group of like-minded peers.

What can unis do?

1. Refer to the “On the radar” Recommendations for unis and govt (pp. 13-15 of the Guidelines doc)
2. Rec 3: Support and resource academic and professional staff to implement inclusive pedagogies and practices.
3. Rec 4: Apply an equity lens to rules and regulations.
4. Apply a mental health lens when developing policy, strategies, teaching and learning documents, curriculum ...
5. Can we reconsider some of the rigid rules we have? (e.g. around extensions)
6. ???



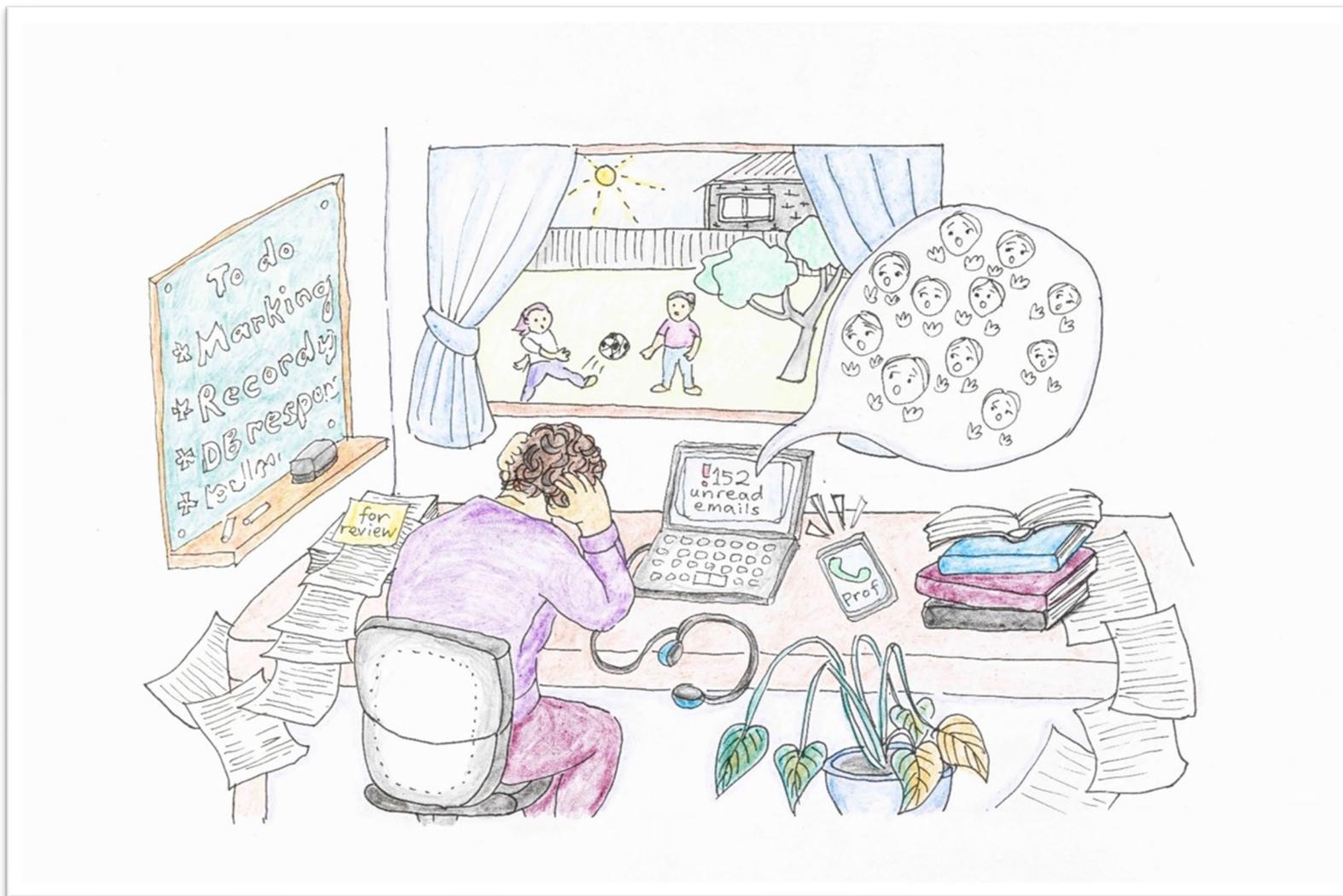
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What about staff mental wellbeing?



Thanks for coming along today 😊

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For further reading: The report and articles from the research

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