DARLENE MCLENNAN: Now I will hand over to you Priscilla. Thank you.

PRISCILLA ENALLS: Thanks Darlene and thanks ADCET for the opportunity to present my work and you’re right it’s a nice opportunity to be sharing this in mental health week. So today I’m going to be ... the topic of my presentation is “Juggling feeling capable and different” and this is work I did as part of my PhD. I think between 2012 and 2016 I was working on this piece of work and I want to acknowledge my two supervisors, Professor Ellie Fossey and Associate Professor Lindsay Howie. We did this work when I was a candidate at La Trobe University and they were both working there at that time and they’re no longer working there now and neither am I. I wanted to acknowledge my current workplace which is Neami National and we are a large national provider of community mental health services. So it's really nice to be applying my research skills in a different setting but still using all of these. I came to this topic from my PhD study because I had worked in clinical mental health services as an occupational therapist for a long time and I had tried many times to support people that I was working with back into study. And most times it wasn't a great success. So whether I was supporting students to go back into TAFE or to university, things often didn't work out as well as we had hoped and often students found that they couldn't complete their studies. Then I had a career shift and I went and was teaching occupational therapy at university and I was teaching many of my courses that I was teaching were around mental health as a topic and I found as soon as I started to talk about mental health as a subject topic students would approach me and start to share their experiences. So I often found that I was a magnet within the courses that I ran for students to share their experiences. I started to read the literature about what are the best ways to support students with mental health issues at university. And I guess I was thinking the literature had a large gap and that was ... the gap was the voices of students themselves. So there was a whole lot of ideas about what students needed, but it wasn't necessarily coming from the students themselves. I felt like it would be really useful to actually spend time with students talking to them and get their perspective. So that is sort of the starting point of my talk. If people are interested in emailing me or chatting with me afterwards please feel free to email; I'm really happy to talk further. I'm fairly passionate about this topic still. What I set out to do was to generate a theory that was grounded in the experience of students themselves about studying at university while they were living with mental ill health and distress. I used a constructivist grounded theory method, really using the work of Cathy Sharmaz as a central guide and I also used a participatory approach. I wanted to do that because I really wanted to have people with mental health issues involved right from the start. So, people with mental health issues were invited to work with me on this project as part of a critical reference group, and they were involved in thinking about how to frame the study, how to ... what sorts of questions I should be asking students. They worked with me over two and a half years where they supported the work I did in analysis of the data. They were really a touchstone in all of the analysis process. And I have worked with some of the participants in that group to disseminate the findings as well and hope to do a little bit more in that space. So they were the main methodological approaches. So who was involved in the study? There were 21 people with a lived experience of mental ill health and university study ... were part of my ... the overall sample. So that involved the critical reference group that I mentioned. And the critical reference group included I think there was five, six people overall, over the two and a half years, four at any one time, myself and my two supervisors were part of the critical reference group. And we had 12 meetings over those two and a half years and then there were 15 in-depth interviews that I conducted with students at one university, at La Trobe where I was working at the time. I went back to six of those people to do follow-up interviews 12 months later and then I followed up with them again by email and three of them sent me written responses. So that in grounded theory the whole idea is that you do some analytic work, you put those ideas back to the participants and they comment and it’s a back and forth process like that. So I had two ways of going back to people. I was going back to some of the people that I had interviewed but I was also going back to this critical reference group and they were supporting my understanding of, and meaning making, from the data. So this is a little snapshot of the 15 interview participants. They were aged between 21 and 39 years, so a mean age of 26 years. Possibly a little bit older than your average university student but in a way maybe that makes sense, because people talked about a slowed down process of participating or getting started with or coming back to university. There were 10 people in bachelor programs and five postgraduates and there were 10 females and five males. I didn't ask people specifically to talk a whole lot about their mental ill health but people shared these self-reported diagnoses. People often talked about having more than one diagnosis. As you can see there, that adds up to more than the overall sample but 13 people talked about depression, six anxiety, two with psychosis, one with post traumatic stress disorder, one with bipolar disorder and one with obsessive compulsive disorder. What was interesting when people shared their stories with me was there were some commonalities in their additional experiences. 12 of the 15 people had experiences of trauma. Either in their childhood, adolescence or early adulthood. Seven talked about having parents with a mental health issue. Six talked about having a sibling with a mental health issue. Two people were incredibly isolated, so they really were not having social contact with anyone else through the time that I spoke with them. At the initial interview six of the 15 people were using more formalised supports. Interestingly, when I went back to six people again some people had taken up supports during that intervening year. So they were using ... maybe it was a doctor, psychologist, counsellor or a university support. But it certainly wasn't the majority of the people were connected with supports. I recruited this participant group by sticking up some posters around the university. And I was really ... that was a concern for me, that I wouldn't actually find participants, that people wouldn't be willing to come forward and talk. I went around and stuck up posters and before I got back to my office I had a phone call and it was actually very, very easy to recruit people. I had more than these 15 people contact me. But some people couldn't make the interviews or became more unwell before we managed to hook up a time to speak. But I think, yeah, I had over ... there was around 21 people who contacted me in a fairly short space of time. So, no shortage of people out there who were interested in the topic and willing to talk. So, the main part of my talk today is really the findings, the theoretical ideas that I came up with. So I'm going to talk you through those now. So, this is the way that I have ended up constructing, or we, the critical reference group and I, have ended up constructing the findings, through a long process of data analysis. And we certainly acknowledge that this is not the only story that could have been drawn from the data. But this certainly felt like an important story. It's a story that’s not really described anywhere else in the literature as far as I can see. It's a story that resonated with people as I put it back to them and it's certainly a story that has resonated when I have presented this presentation more broadly. I will be interested to hear how you find the conceptualisation and any responses you have to it. The way I have understood things is that studying at university is like a vortex. If you imagine like a tornado, its spinning and it’s creating its own force. People are drawn into the vortex because they feel capable. They are drawn towards this learning and studying experience because they feel like they have got the capacity and their life experiences and their current situation tells them that this is the right place for them. So they are drawn with a force into that vortex. So, I think it's really important to emphasise this finding of feeling capable. This is what some of the participants said. “Feeling capable. University is the right place for me”. Kate said, "I guess I was just naturally gifted with learning. I had a really good memory in terms of remembering the content and I always did well in my tests” and Maxwell talked about having an appetite to learn. Betty said, "It's something that I'm really good at. I'm good at reading, I have an inquiring mind, I'm curious and like to write and think". So there was this real sense of "University is the right place for me." But a really core finding shared by all of the people that I spoke with was that as well as feeling capable, students talked about feeling different. So I conceptualised this feeling different as the central core around which the experience of studying spins. So, whilst students are drawn into the vortex they are spinning around this central idea of feeling different. Now, I don't claim to have worked out exactly why students feel different. I think that's a really complicated idea that is frequently talked about as, or sort of put in the basket of stigma. My sense of it is, after thinking about this a lot, is I don't fully understand that and I'm not sure that stigma explains the whole experience. But anyway, people spoke to me about that they did feel different and some spoke about feeling different from a very early age, while for others it was a sense that they became more aware of it during the course of their studies. Feeling different was universally held but it was not connected to people's diagnosis. So it was just this sense of feeling different. The way I have set up this image is that towards the bottom of the vortex people feel more different and towards the top of the vortex they feel less different. People might enter the vortex at any point and move up and down the vortex across their experience of study. This is a few of people's comments talking about feeling different. Maxwell said, "I really felt like an outsider. I felt like nobody understood me" and Stacey said, "The world expects you to be normal and I don't think I live up to that expectation." For Mackenzie it was, "My parents separated when I was a baby and my dad is an ex-bikie and my mum has a mental illness and we were always quite poor when I was growing up so I felt like I had all of these things that made me feel different from a really young age. I have internalised being different a lot, it’s part of my identity." So there was this really common idea, people talked about it in different ways but it all came back to this sense of feeling different. So, students on entering university seemed to be sharing this common goal, which was this striving to be just like everyone else, just a regular student, an ordinary student, a normal student. However they used different terms for it. But they just wanted to fit in, they wanted to learn, they wanted to gain a qualification, they wanted to meet their potential and university was their pathway to reaching that potential. But when they felt this sense of difference and they were striving to be a regular student they needed to find ways to manage that sense of difference. And they ... quite a few of them talked about, "This is not a linear pathway" so that they might feel more or less different at different times and they might need to use more or less different strategies across their time of being a student. If you imagine this as a vortex, at the top there is probably less force, at the bottom there is more force. As people were drawn down into the vortex they felt more different and there was less space for them to ... I guess the force and the pressure was more unrelenting. So they needed more active ways to manage feeling different. Towards the top there is more space, there is less force, so there was less effort in managing feeling different. But there was still effort. Even at the top they talked about, "Well, it just never quite let's you go so there is always something you have to be doing to manage this sense difference." So these are a couple of quotes. People talked about striving to be regular. Nicole said, "I don't want to be different, I just want to be a regular student” and Reggie said, "I just want to be accepted as normal and not have anyone else know." I'm sure many of you who have worked in this space can relate to that idea of not wanting to share it, not wanting to disclose and struggling on their own. This is the final model picture that I came up with. It's sort of ... as people are striving to be regular students they feel both capable and different and managing difference is an active process that they have to do. And they do that by ... I sort of grouped it into three different ways. Towards the top they are reconciling difference, in the middle they are wrestling with difference, towards the bottom they are hanging in with difference. And then out the bottom you’ll see that there’s dropping out, letting go of hopes, falling out of study, tolerating despair and that loop of falling out actually leads back in because of all the students I spoke to were currently students. So everyone I spoke to was studying, but several of them had dropped out ... I think 8 had dropped out before, and three had dropped out more than once. So I think this bottom part of the loop is a really important part because sometimes when students who really feel like university is the place for them, dropping out is absolutely devastating and they feel like that is going to be the end of their study story. And I think many students can and do find a way of returning back to study and I think that's a really important message to be able to convey to people, that maybe this time isn't the right time for you but there are pathways back to study. So I'm going to talk about each of these phases in a bit more detail to tell you some of the detail that people spoke about. Starting at the bottom, people talked about not managing difference and dropping out. This was a time of real devastation for people. Sometimes it was a brief relief, that they could just let go and suddenly the pressure was off. But all of them felt real despair and had to work out ways to tolerate that and then think about what to do next. People dropped out when their effort required exceeded their capacity or their resources to stick at study, it felt like a failure. People spoke about letting go of their hopes. One woman I spoke to said, "I couldn't do an oral presentation so I just dropped out" and it was at that moment she just knew she couldn't go on. She didn't tell anyone, she just stopped coming. While others talked about falling out of study. It started off going, this is a quote, "It started off going to all of the lectures and all the labs and then I started skipping lectures and only attending labs. Then the labs became too hard because I didn't know the content because I didn't attend the lectures, so you start skipping the labs and by the end of semester it just sort of trickles off down that way, then by the end of semester you're not attending at all." So this sense of just gradually people falling out of study slowly. Whereas for Reggie, he talked about, "Well, I just got kicked out because I went crazy, I missed all of my exams and I went crazy." So there were different ways that people fell out. People talked about tolerating the despair and when they were in that state they talked about feeling numb, hollow, getting out of my head, feeling completely alone and a complete failure, ending up in hospital, one person said it was like hitting rock bottom. And then people talked about finding ways to return to study, feeling the pull to come back, maybe they were re-evaluating their goals and values and some people talked about feeling like they were forced to come back. So forced for financial reasons, like they were going to lose all of their Centrelink payments so enrolling in part time study at least was a way to maintain some of their payments. Some students spoke about family forcing them to come back, particularly one international student was having a real struggle and had several periods of dropping out, but family wouldn't accept that there was another option. So she found her way coming back to study. Then we have towards the bottom part of the vortex, so this is the part where students were hanging in with difference. So here they described all the space was at the pointy end of the vortex is taken up by difference. They describe this constant pressure, extreme effort to tolerate and persist with the demands of studying. At this point participants were not typically reaching out for help. They talked about their identity as being dominated by difference so they talked about being alone, isolated, just hanging in, not feeling like they had a whole lot of choice. It was just a daily battle. So they talked about being alone or if they weren't alone they felt alone. They could be surrounded by supportive others but they still had this sense of feeling alone. Hanging in was done in isolation. There was little choice to do anything differently and they felt really stuck with that. I really want to emphasise the fluid nature of participants' experiences. Nearly all of the students I spoke to could relate to this period of hanging in with difference when they felt alone, stuck, unable to reach out for help. So for some of them this was very acute at the time that I interviewed them but for others it was a memory so people talked about moving up and down in the vortex over time. These were the four main themes that fitted with hanging in with difference. People talked about "concealing who I am". Nicole said “I don't let people know who I am." There was a sense of you had to protect yourself from the world. Natalie said, "I'm not good, I don't like people to see. I have always incorrectly seen it as a massive weakness. I don't like to tell anybody that there has been a problem. No, I have never revealed or tried to play on it or anything like that. It's like a secret shame." They also talked about retreating from the social world. They talked about, you know, moving away from people, moving into spaces where they could be by themselves. Someone said, "Not having to deal with people and all of their talking and all of their subtleties." People talked about sleeping, retreating to their bed, retreating to their rooms, "I didn't want to do anything. What I did was just had lots and lots of sleep." That's what Stacey talked about. People talked about all the methods they used to numb or smother their distress, they talked about alcohol, drugs, cutting, burning, binging or purging on food, gaming and allowing themselves to become obsessed with ideas or projects, ways to lose themself. One student talked about his World of Warcraft addiction and another one said, "I just drink by myself at home." There was nothing social about it, it was just numbing the pain. Other people talked about "battling my thoughts". I think it was Michelle, yeah she said “all the negative stuff comes up and then I’ve just got to counteract it with logical stuff but it's a daily think, I still have to work on it." They talked about this effortful process of having to think through their days, force themselves to get on the tram, get to university, that sort of thing. Mackenzie said, "Sometimes I think about dropping out. Before exams I was like I'm going to fail. I'm just going to drop out, I just need to. I guess ... I need to just reason with myself and be like, ‘You've made it this far. You might as well at least try the exams’. That's what I had to do. It was just like, ‘You might as well go and you might pass. It's better than having fails’." So there’s this constant talking themselves around. Then we move to the centre of the vortex where people are talking about wrestling with difference. So in this middle part of the vortex people described that there was still lots of pressure but there was a bit more space, so they had a bit more space where they could negotiate their relationship with difference. I sort of described it as a wrestle. Sometimes they were on top of things and they were managing things and they were going in a forward direction. But then they could quite easily lose ground. So lose their footing, and their sense of difference would really get on top of them again. There were times when they had greater agency and choice and control and then there were times when they lost that. So it was a real up and down sort of time in this wrestling process. But in this wrestling process people were certainly able to talk more about the future focus, having a more positive and optimistic future. Space of possibility but also challenge. So these were the ... I will go through the themes under wrestling difference a little bit slower. They talked about coming to know themselves, and part of that was acknowledging and revealing their difference and allowing some vulnerability. Here this person said, "I'm just really at the moment fixated with allowing myself to breathe emotionally and maybe take stock of what I have learnt through uni. It's been a real process of self-discovery. God I have come so far from being like every day suicidal and anxious and unhappy. To actually just be able to go for a walk and just feel at peace, rather than just always in my head criticising myself, and that’s huge”. She was about to complete, she was just a few weeks away from completing her bachelor's degree. And allowing vulnerability. So people spoke about letting their guard down, considering connecting with others. So they were actually thinking about reaching out. They were acknowledging the unpredictability of their situation. Reggie, one guy I spoke to, he said, "I wonder if I'm relapsing now, I wonder if I’m slowly just ... I wonder if maybe I'm going downhill and ... that's the thing because there is always chaos and stress going on. How do I know if I'm in a healthy frame of being or if I'm not? How do I know if I'm going off the rails? You’d think you would be able to judge your own state of sanity but it just seems like to me I could quite easily relapse and I would never know”. So there was this real sense of becoming more aware but also being aware of just how vulnerable or fragile people's situations were sometimes. So that was Coming to know self. People also spoke about accepting limits in this part of the vortex. So they talked about adapting their expectations of self. They were talking about you know becoming more or less flexible with their ... more flexible with their expectations of self. They were saying maybe it's okay if I don't get straight A's. Maybe that's not the end of the world. They also spoke ... this one, knowing limits - keeping death as plan C, is an interesting one. I heard several students talk about a very similar concept to this and as I shared it with other students and said have you come across this? And people really related to this as an idea. It's always been my plan C. Plan A: try to do something, plan B: try again and plan C: f\*!@ it die. It's been the plan for years. I'm not going to accept failure, I’m not. The problem with that is suicide is a motivator, I don't want to be a kitchen hand so I must study. If I start to fail in study well I’m not going to be a kitchen hand again; I will choose death. These students were not actively suicidal but it was like it was there in the back of their minds as a bit of a back-up plan. I think that's a really interesting ... I think we don't always think about ah ... the background suicidal thinking rather than the foregrounded suicidal thinking and I think that's another interesting area to explore. And then the other big theme here was seizing control of what I can. So there was this sense of people were just doing something, just doing something positive and active was a helpful thing. They talked about managing environments and demands and they talked about connecting with others and using supports. They spoke about being proactive, wanting something better and taking action to achieve it. Who said this? Sam said, "I'm like this is not what I want and I just got really scared", she was talking about taking lots of drugs, "I just got really scared and then I reached out to friends and counselling services and I made an explicit decision just to totally quit because it was like I don't want this, I don't need it. It's not helping me". So she made this choice to actively make a change. People spoke about managing their environments and their demands. That might have been their social environments, their study demands, whatever. So when they were feeling less capable they did things like deciding to study part time, dropping a subject or choosing to just let one of their subjects go and they found ways to manage things like group work. So finding a partner who would be prepared to work at their pace in a paired lab prac or finding a group of students that they could tolerate doing some of their group work with was a massive relief. If they couldn't find that group of students and they couldn't manage those environments that was a real stressor. I know that's a really common theme student’s talk about, that group work can be really, really hard. When they felt more capable they could participate in more things and they could be in spaces that were more demanding. When they were less capable they managed that. They also talked about connecting with other people. Here was the point they talked about using supports. Sometimes they were using professional supports, counselling on campus, psychologists, doctors, psychiatrists but frequently it was informal supports so they were really informally going and speaking to one teacher and just feeling like some sort of connection and support through that one teacher, a friend, finding a friend, a family member. Those sorts of things. One student said, "I find services", she was talking about university support services, "I find services are hard to access. I guess just because I have anxiety and it's scary, also because of the stigma around mental illness and stuff. I'm afraid to talk to teachers about it. I don't tell them why I need extensions and stuff because I'm worried what they would think, I'm worried they would not take it seriously." While there was this sense of reaching out and using supports was a good thing, there were also a whole lot of challenges around that and there has certainly been a lot of talk about the barriers to reaching out for supports in the literature. To summarise, wrestling with difference in the central part of the vortex was all about coming to know self, accepting limits and seizing control of what I can. There was this real sense of wrestling, that it was a space of possibility but also challenge. And then towards the top of the vortex people spoke about reconciling difference. So here, difference was less dominant; there was space for other identities to coexist. People could be accepting of their difference, able to maybe celebrate their difference because the difference felt less negative. There was less pressure, there was a range of options, people talked about reframing things. They had more of a future orientation and some of them had this sense of activism. They wanted to share their learning. There was a pursuit of rights. People spoke about embracing wellbeing. They were focusing on their health rather than their ill health and spoke about doing things like getting exercise, sleep, having good relationships, having balance in their life and enjoying study. They talked about holding hope. This is a nice quote from Reggie, "You know what, I can still be whatever I want and I can still go out and get a job, I can. Or maybe not be whatever I want but I still can have a good life and I can do all of these things that everyone can do and that I'm not limited really at all. All I have got to do is have a plan and just follow it and I will be okay". And between the two times I interviewed Reggie, he had lost his accommodation because of his mental ill health, he’d quite a long stint in hospital, he’d had a period back living at home and then he’d found his feet, was back in a flat, was back at university full time. So he had had a real roller coaster of a ride but that was all in the course of 12 months and he still had this sense of really holding hope for his future. People talked about positive risk taking. They were feeling like they were ready to tackle old issues. Some of them were talking about going back and dealing with some family stuff that they had’t dealt with for a long time, that sort of thing. People talked about this vigilance, watching out for ill health, not just assuming there was never going to be another problem but just being aware of flare ups and having a proactive plan and strategies for managing things into the future. So, this is the overall summary. Striving to be a regular student. Students feel capable but they also feel different and they find ways to manage that sense of difference. So then I thought about, well, what’s actually causing people to go down in the spiral or up in the vortex? So thinking about what are the things that confirm students' sense of difference and what are the things that allow space for difference? These are some of the themes that came out strongly: is that categorising confirms difference. Negative messaging. While most of the participants had at least one positive relationship that buffered the impacts of difference, messages from others could really confirm their sense of difference. And if people did try to reach out and connect with supports or reach out to other people, if they got negative messages, that really made them shy of trying again. That sense of negative messages from others confirmed their sense that they were unworthy or deficient or wrong somehow. People talked about isolation as confirming difference, and that makes sense, because you don't have any of the positive messages coming in. The more isolated people get the more disconnected they get from any messages that challenge that they can manage. And silencing confirms difference; it contributes to that sense of isolation. I think the students spoke about that there is no shared space where they can wonder, where they can wonder what is happening for me now, why do I feel like this, why is there this sense of difference, how can I manage, what do people do when they are in this situation? The things that allowed space for difference ... I like the work of Iris Marion Young who argues for a politics that attends to rather than represses difference. I think in the university context this would be where there is not an effort to correct people's deficits, trying to make students better fit the fairly normative environment of the academy but having an environment where people can acknowledge difference, welcome, celebrate the beneficial contribution of students with diverse experiences. I was struck through the whole study about how amazing these students are, like what they do cope with, what they do bring, their strengths. And I think that's not always the message that we hear. Belonging helps people move up the spiral. Finding a space where they belong. When students did find a space to speak out and share their experience that also seemed to help them belong and connect. So in conclusion, I found that the experience of study for people living with mental ill health and distress really, it was essentially about feeling different as well as feeling capable. The experience of feeling different for students in this study was not just about having a diagnosed mental illness, experiencing symptoms or behaving uncharacteristically. While any of these may contribute to feeling different, there were not essential to the experience. What was essential however was a personal sense of self as different in comparison to others or in comparison to one's past self or imagined future self. Participants actively manage this sense of difference but these essential actions were mostly hidden and unspoken. Consequently students felt that they alone were the only ones feeling different or engaging in the effort for work of managing that difference. This also means that the efforts of these students are largely hidden to the university, and this understanding therefore doesn't contribute to policies and practice. A goal might be supporting students to realise that, "I'm less different than I thought" or, "Maybe we're all similar and different". By eliminating the hidden processes students use to manage feeling both capable and different this study gives voice to the student experience, it shows students with mental ill health are adaptive, resilient and resourceful and that many find ways to cope, to persist with, return to and succeed at study with or without professional supports. The study affirms that many students experience real concerns, suffering and distress and acknowledges that many students benefit from professional supports on and off campus. However the findings challenge the idea that diagnostic labels provide a helpful way of categorising student issues or needs or predicting success in the student role. The findings provide an alternative to the dominant messages around professional help seeking as the only legitimate means to mange mental ill health and distress. Communicating the findings of this study to students may clarify how common the experience of feeling different is and it may shed light on the active ways student manage feeling different. Greater awareness may decrease students' sense of difference or shame as they seek to stay in study. Increased investment in peer support within universities is warranted where students with lived experience of mental ill health can share their experiences, challenge stereotypes and create inclusive spaces. So I just thought I would put up a couple of questions that I think it's worth pondering over and I have certainly pondered over. And maybe ask if anyone has any questions they would like to ask.

DARLENE: Fantastic. Thank you Priscilla, that was great. I'm really taken by the statement, you know, attend to the difference rather than ..., yeah about the differences, so I was really kind of taken by that statement. So thank you. If anybody has a question that they would like to ask Priscilla please add that to the question pod and I will ask Priscilla. So with the questions you have asked us, Priscilla, has there been any answers you have come up with at the moment to any of those?

PRISCILLA: Look, I think how do students ... I think it's really important for us to ask how students come to know about the experience of other students. I think I was really struck by ... students were absolutely desperate to come and talk to me. And some of them had never spoken about this stuff to anyone else before. And some of them felt like ... I remember a student in a very large faculty, so she felt like she was one of about 500 students, she felt like no-one knew her and no-one would care if she lived or died. And that she was certainly the only student in that course who would have been struggling. She told me, "I'm the only one that would be failing." I thought wow, sitting on the other side of the fence as a lecturer you think, wow, it's such a common experience but I think that's not always understood by students. So there is something not quite right in our messaging maybe to students that gets in the way of them hearing that stuff.

DARLENE: That's great. A question we've got is: Do you see a difference between the students you interviewed and perhaps business students who may feel greater pressure than other students? Is there any different cohort studying than others that kind of experience more mental illness?

PRISCILLA: Well, I mean, there has been cohort studies done. There is certainly talk about medicine students, law students who ... nursing students ... who are very reluctant to disclose because they quite rightly have very real concerns about how that might affect their future careers. I think that's come up as people move into the medical profession, there is talk in the media more recently about doctors not being able to disclose mental health issues and the impact that has on their patient care, their own mental health, their suicide rates, those sorts of things. I think there are very real concerns. Students do think about those things. How, you know, there is pressure within courses, there is pressure to get jobs at the end of courses. I think some of those things make disclosure tough. I'm not sure what the answers are, but I think ... I guess one of my messages is that we need to tell students that there’s a range of ways to seek support; it doesn't always have to be, or only professional support is the only answer. So clearly, many students need professional support and get a whole lot of benefit from it. But if they feel like that's not an option for them, well what are the other options? I think increasing students' sense of a range of options I think ... ways that people might anonymously might seek support online. We really need to think about well how do we bolster that and how do we think more creatively about the ways we can support students without making them feel like full disclosure is the only way.

DARLENE: Ok, excellent. There is just a question here about using external support services. Is there anything within your research that's brought out the benefits of that or if that impacted on students at all?

PRISCILLA: Yep. Many students were using external supports and found that was a helpful separation. While others talked about it was really good to get their supports from within the university because then there could be flow-on benefits, you know someone might be able to contact lecturers and they wouldn't need to do all that independently. Again I think the message to be giving to students is there's a range of options. There is not a single way to seek support, you might need to try a couple of different ways before you find a way that works for you and that works for your current set-up. And I think encouraging students who might have had a bad experience to say, "Well you know many people have bad experiences help seeking but there’s other ways you can seek help." Or maybe talking to your friends, or maybe ... many students spoke about just having one teacher that they could go and off-load to made a real difference. I think many of us who have worked in that system will probably know that that is a helpful thing to be offering. Often if you are a staff member it's something you are not acknowledged for. That time is not considered to form part of your workload, so I think that gets tricky. But I think it's a really important role staff can play if students seek you out, that you give a fairly positive open reception to any help seeking.

DARLENE: So just following on from academic and teaching staff, what are the attitudes of academic staff, or did you find within the research and students finding about their support from them? Was anything identified in there?

PRISCILLA: Enormous variation. Some incredibly negative responses. One student in between our interviews, she decided that she was going to disclose her experience of disclosure in a health science course was ... she found herself in a group meeting with other students and they were all grouped together as students considered at risk. She didn't know what that meant. But she found out that they were all considered at risk of failing a placement. She was grouped with students who might have been international students struggling with English, students who had failed multiple subjects and all the students with mental health issues were also pitched into this group. And they were expected to workshop together how they were going to overcome their "problem" so that they wouldn't fail their placement. This is not a great response, I suggest. She was just devastated because she had really thought about her decision to disclose, made what she thought was a really clear and strong decision and then had a really negative response. And that's terrible.

DARLENE: Yeah, I can understand that. Did you find that failing an assessable task or a whole unit was a trigger for moving down in the vortex?

PRISCILLA: Yep, absolutely yep, students talked about that. Health science students in particular talked about placements. When they moved tasks, so they might have been able to manage quite well in the academic tasks and then when they were moved to a placement where there was a range of demands on them they were out of their comfort zone, that was a real tricky time. Other students talked about coming towards the end of semester, everything seemed to collapse. They didn't have access to their usual supports as the study pressure went up, their coping strategies went down. Which is ... you know, I think many of us would connect with that.

DARLENE: Yes. Another question here is: Any further insights on the separation or not between the feelings students have and their ability to function? i.e., your work potentially supports the idea that feelings of difference don't need to equate to unsuccessful functioning?

PRISCILLA: Yeah, well I saw people who ... I don't know, I have worked in mental health and I sort of instantly would do some sort of assessment of people. I saw people with considerable, what would be called symptoms of, mental illness who were studying and managing and passing quite well. I guess what I tried to do was not come in with that professional judgment but to actually just sit and listen to students and actually hear from them about their ways. I think students who we might think seem to be having considerable challenges with concentrating, remembering, articulating thoughts, complex ideas, those sorts of things, they found ways to do that and do that successfully. Maybe those ways were ... you know, they had really dropped their workload down so they were doing one subject at a time or whatever. They were stretching things out. But I certainly changed my thinking about the relationship between symptoms or diagnoses and students' capacity. I know that's not going to be the case for every student but it's really worth rethinking some of those ideas. Those generic assumptions that we might make don't hold up for all students.

DARLENE: Excellent. I have a question here about work. Would the majority of people interviewed working or not working, do you know?

PRISCILLA: Probably about half of them were working. Some of them certainly weren't and said they decided, "I can't manage both things. I want to succeed at study so I'm going to prioritise that." Whereas other people were working, had families, you know bringing up kids at the same time, that sort of stuff. There was a range of experiences.

DARLENE: Yep, excellent. We're getting quite a few questions in now. Priscilla is happy, or hopefully she’s happy, to answer any questions afterwards that we will post on the website. But just one ... two quick final questions. One is: Did your research indicate that the trimester-isation or the shortening of study periods have any serious impact on students' health and study outcomes?

PRISCILLA: I wasn't really looking at that. No, so I can't really respond to that.

DARLENE: That's fine. And just finally, is your paper published?

PRISCILLA: Ah, nearly.

DARLENE: Nearly.

PRISCILLA: It's coming; it's looking for a home. Yes. So I just have to do a few tweaks but hopefully it will be published soon.

DARLENE: Ok, so we will be able to let people know who joined us today when that's out from the list we’ve got. So thank you so very much for that. It was a fantastic presentation. And for those who joined us late, because I think the time zone and differences has challenged a few of us, the recording has been ... has been, sorry, I got distracted, the recording will be put up online. Priscilla, are you able to go to the last screen just so people have your contact details if they need to contact you.

PRISCILLA: Yeah, sure, absolutely. Feel free to give me an email if you want to chat over the phone. Just let me know your number and when it would suit to talk.

DARLENE: Yep, and just a quick plug again for our next webinar. We're actually keeping on the topic of a lived experience of mental illness for students. Our next webinar will be on 25th October at 1 pm AEDT. The topic is quality in tertiary education and psychiatric disability, it will explore the development of VET courses for students with a lived experience of mental illness by a teacher from the VET sector, so that will be great for our VET practitioners. So that's it. We're just about to hit the 2 o'clock mark, so you have done very well Priscilla, well done with your timing. Thank you, everybody, for joining us and thank you to Bradley Reporting for captioning. I wish you all a glorious rest of the day and rest of the week. Thank you everybody.

PRISCILLA: Thanks. Bye.