Partnering for Program Prosperity: An Investigation of What Students Need from University Group-based Wellbeing Programs

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Abstract

Wellbeing group-based programs offered by university counselling services provide valuable opportunities for students to enhance their mental health and increase their academic success. However, there is an ongoing challenge in understanding what students need and want from programs, and what will increase their attendance. This article details a Student-Staff Partnership project developed by University of Queensland (UQ) students and student counsellors in response to a reduction in the number of students accessing wellbeing programs. The article discusses the development of the project, from the initial idea of creating wellbeing programs to target the needs of students, as identified by the students themselves. A survey was developed to assess student needs to be targeted by wellbeing programs, to understand student preference for program delivery mode, and to explore the needs of students who present with additional barriers to academic success. The existing lack of research into this area, especially in relation to student mental health and "mental wealth" research, makes this important and informative data that can shape the future of wellbeing programs. Key findings include discrepancies in student knowledge of individual versus wellbeing programs offered by counselling, and preference for word of mouth and social media as sources of information. The value in partnering with students is discussed, as are additional findings, challenges, and successes.

Keywords

Student support; Student and staff partnerships; Student counselling; Mental health; Mental wellbeing; Wellbeing programs; Therapeutic groups; Preventative mental health.

Introduction

In 2023, the University of Queensland (UQ) student counselling service[1] undertook a Student-Staff Partnership research project to provide current data on actual student needs in relation to counselling wellbeing programs. UQ Counselling is active in the creation of bespoke therapeutic wellbeing programs aimed at preventing psychological distress and increasing mental wellbeing skills for all enrolled students across all campuses. Programs have been created based upon perceived need, based on frequent presentation concerns or high-traffic areas on the counselling information webpage. However, prior to this study, no direct data had been obtained from the student cohort. The Student-Staff Partnership project was designed and undertaken over 12 months and involved the participation of seven student partners and two student counsellors. The outcomes were illustrative of the challenges in obtaining data, marketing programs, and sustaining engagement from the student population in a large university setting with over 55,000 students.

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[1] Information on this service is available at https://my.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/student-support/health-and-wellbeing/mental-health-and-emotional-support/counselling.

Background

Across the sector, university counselling services provide important assistance to students, as this population experiences heightened psychological distress. The elevation in distress whilst studying often coincides within a development phase in which mental health issues are more likely to occur—between 17 and 25 years of age (Browne et al., 2017; Orygen, 2017). Brown et al. (2017) highlighted the challenges of meeting demands from students for counselling sessions, a situation experienced by the UQ counselling service for several years. Orygen's 2017 report detailed the loss of academic success and completion, as well as the economic loss to federal governments, resulting from mental health difficulties faced by students. While this project aimed to improve the engagement of students in group programs, increasing "mental wealth"—the economic and social capital that peaks in early adulthood—was incidentally captured in this research (McGorry, 2017).

The UQ student counselling service has a long and successful history in providing individual mental health support to UQ students. Depression, anxiety, and academic stress have traditionally been the main presenting concerns, along with relationship difficulties, self-confidence, and the supervisory relationship. Anecdotally, waiting times of over four weeks on occasion have been both an indicator of the success of the UQ counselling service and a difficulty for the service to navigate. High demand has impacted the service's ability to provide proactive support and exacerbated stress on the counselling team. A commitment to the provision of relevant and successful support, as well as preventative assistance promoting student wellbeing and success, led to the development of a range of wellbeing programs. Designed by the student counsellors, these wellbeing programs are additional to individual counselling and utilise a therapeutic group-based approach. The programs are varied in nature, and include psychoeducation, practical learning activities, and discussion. The programs are free and confidential, and students can engage in as many or few sessions as they wish, based on individual preference. Students historically have engaged in sessions actively and the group-based process also provides peer learning and peer support.

The programs initially had strong attendance across the cohort, with diversity in age, program level, cultural background, and identified gender. A gradual reduction in attendance occurred but rebounded during, and immediately after, the Covid-19 university response. Over the three years to 2023, students gradually returned to campus but many wellbeing programs either ceased or shifted online. During these years, student engagement with UQ Counselling continued to reduce. In 2023, several programs were offered, but numbers remained low or further decreased, despite targeted marketing campaigns formulated on student feedback. The lack of engagement precipitated the formation of two key questions—what do students need from group programs and what will lead to engagement?

Through the UQ Student-Staff Partnership (SSP) program[2], students and staff partner on projects that aim to improve the student experience. The program provides key opportunities for connection, collaboration, and shared learning. A focus on the diversity of voices allows meaningful partnerships to occur, strengthening participants' professional skills. In early 2023, two student counsellors applied for an SSP project, with the following aims:

- Gain a snapshot of current student needs in terms of group-based programs.

- Ascertain what students want to engage in, and what method works best to allow for student participation.

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[2] Information is available at https://employability.uq.edu.au/ssp-projects.

- Explore the needs of diverse groups, with emphasis on students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, students with disabilities, neurodivergent students, and those who identify as LGBTQI+.

Method

The first round of the SSP project commenced in Semester 1 2023 with four students and two student counsellors. In Semester 2, the second round commenced as an extension to increase the number of responses obtained from students. Three students left at the end of the first round for a variety of reasons, with the second round commencing with three new students and one student continuing from round one. A project plan was developed, and a mixed methods approach was utilised. This included liaising with a range of stakeholders across UQ, including the UQ Union who have frequent contact with students needing support. A questionnaire was developed and delivered via Qualtrics, distributed to students across both semesters through word of mouth, promotion at events on campus, and social media. A need for a questionnaire in the Chinese language was identified, which was developed and distributed to students through social media and word of mouth. A survey methodology was chosen by the student partners. The initial group felt this would be a quick and efficient way to obtain data, therefore increasing the number of responses. The questionnaire included 12 multiple choice questions and three open-ended questions to allow students to provide more information. The design was also based on the student partners' previous research experiences. A focus group was also planned but, due to lack of student participation, no data were collected.

Ethical considerations were discussed by the group during the development of the questionnaire, with an emphasis on participant consent and confidentiality. Therefore, no identifiable data were included and completion was voluntary and web-based through Qualtrics. A retrospective exemption from human ethics research review was granted by UQ Research Ethics and Integrity.

Results

Qualitative and quantitative data form the basis of the key findings in this project. A total of 132 students completed surveys. The students were aged between 18 and 35 years or older, with the majority aged between 18 and 24 years in both the English and Chinese language survey versions. In both language versions, most respondents identified as female.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students were invited to complete the survey, with the majority of respondents in both language versions being from the first-year cohort. The next largest respondent cohort were second-year undergraduates, followed by masters-level students.

Awareness of the group programs was a key theme of interest. Across both surveys (English and Chinese language), most students reported not being aware of group programs being offered at UQ. Students were given an option to respond with "yes" or "no" to this question, and most students surveyed reported being aware of individual counselling being offered but having no or limited knowledge of group programs.

Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions. Students were given an opportunity to report on improvements that they felt would support the mental wellbeing of students. While few comments were received in response to this question, respondents expressed being overwhelmed by excessive advertising at university, which impacted negatively on attention given to group marketing. Students also reported a perceived reduction in university-driven communication in the later years of study post-orientation.

Students surveyed were asked about the source they used to access information about services offered at UQ, as presented in Figure 1. A difference was found between the two language groups. Students who completed the English version reported accessing information predominantly from social media (Instagram followed by Facebook). Word of mouth, specifically from another student via traditional media (such as email), was a close third. In the Chinese language version, students predominantly reported word of mouth followed by social media (WeChat followed by Instagram) with a very small percentage using traditional media. In both versions, there was a small percentage of responses in the "other" category. These included use of the Student Central building as a key hub for information, large events such as the Orientation Week Market Day, the UQ website, or discovering group programs while booking an individual counselling appointment.

Figure 1

Source of Group Session Information—English and Chinese Language Surveys
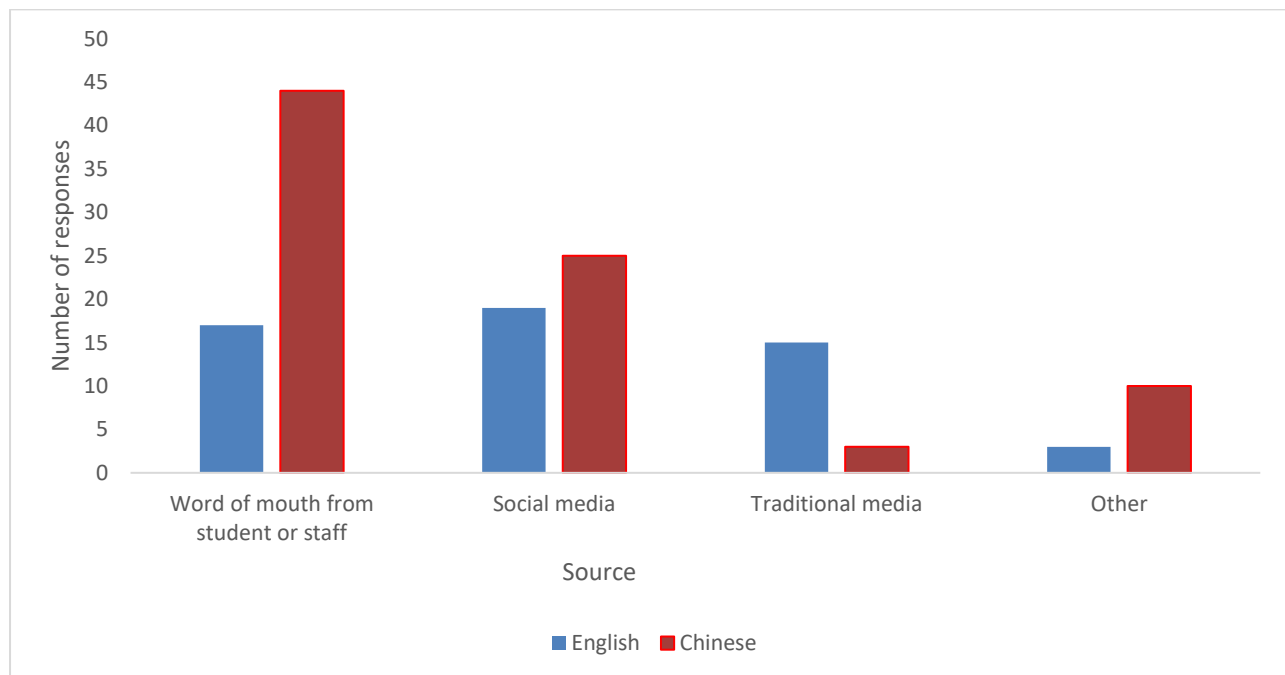
Students were asked to indicate which social media platforms they used. Results are detailed in Figure 2. Instagram and WeChat were the social media platforms utilised by most students, which is important to consider in relation to ongoing marketing of wellbeing programs.

Figure 2

Which Social Media Platforms Students Used
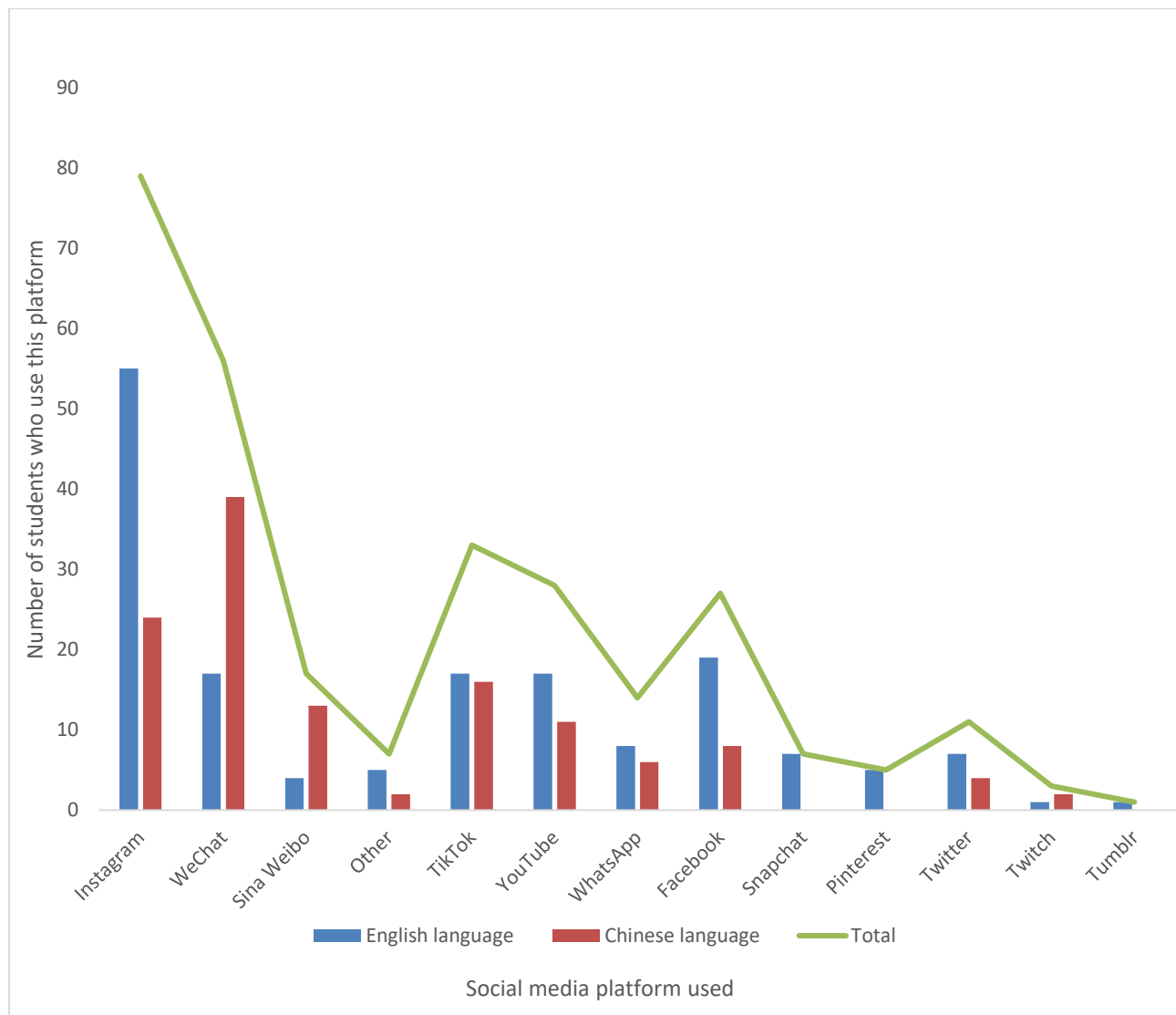
Additional survey information collected indicated that one in five students rated their own overall mental/emotional health as "poor" or "very poor". Most students from both groups indicated a preference for face-to-face delivery of group programs, compared to online or Zoom delivery (see Figure 3). Students were only asked if they had a preference for online via Zoom; no other online options were provided through the survey.

Students were provided with an open-ended question in which they could suggest improvements to the programs. Responses included better advertising, including at orientation; sessions outside class times or multiple sessions; and more information provided on the workshops and resources available. This was an optional question, on which 42 students provided feedback.

Figure 3

Preferred Mode of Program Delivery for Students
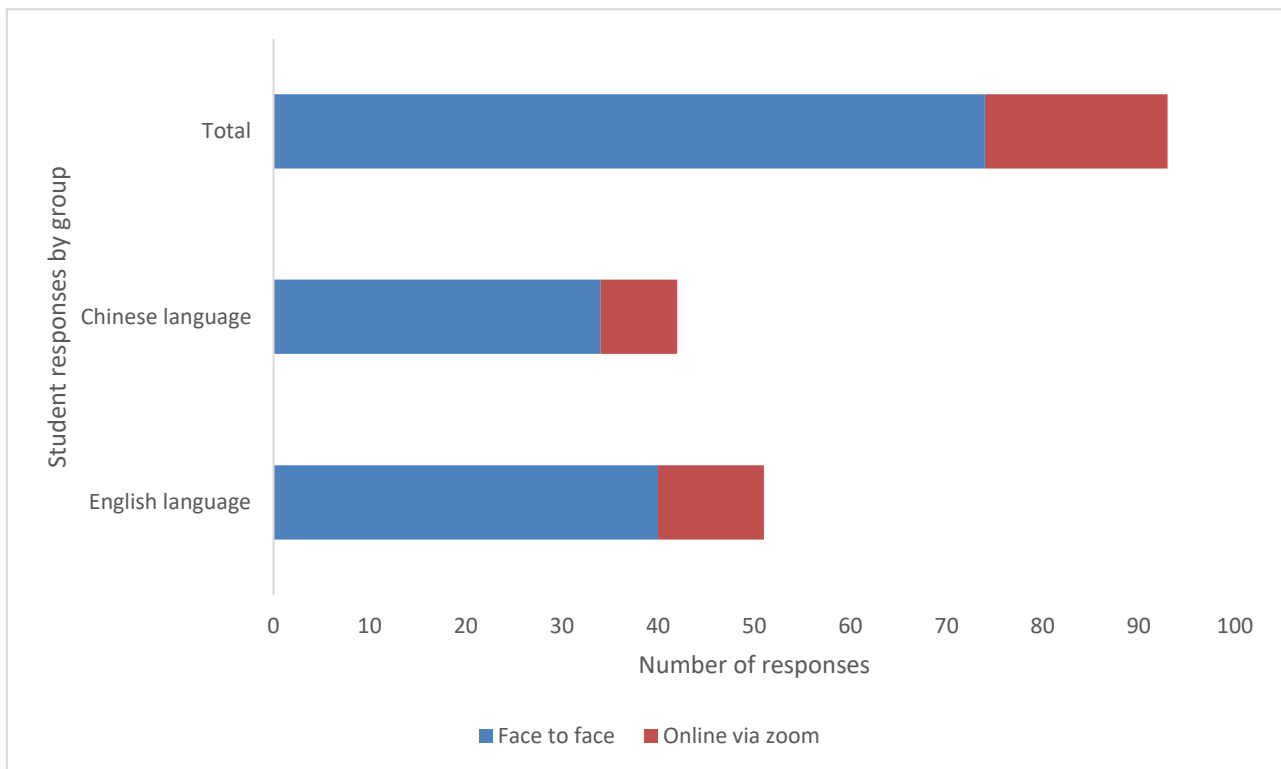
Student partners were the primary researchers during this project and were invited to submit a reflection on their involvement. Their comments are included below.

Amber Edser

For me, the Student-Staff Partnership facilitated by UQ provided a range of opportunities. From developing skills that lay outside of my coursework to establishing a vast network, it enabled me to contribute and feedback [*sic*] into the community that has given me so much. Particularly, as a psychology student, the project enabled me to grow a personal understanding of student needs outside of a textbook, as well as the internal processes of a service aligned with my goals and [making] meaningful connections within. It also challenged me in new ways, particularly due to its highly collaborative nature which we often do not encounter in the classroom. It required me to undergo reflexivity—adapting, reforming, and repositioning my thinking and ways of working— and I could not have asked for a more graceful team to do so with.

More than this individual experience, however, is the project's uniqueness and outcomes. Indeed, through utilising individuals from a range of disciplines, it was able to generate a data profile that more widely encapsulates tertiary group counselling use. It not only allowed the service to be better informed of student needs to develop better future programs but also to enter new streams to reach more of those in need. By embracing all points of view and experience, the project also made me feel empowered to contribute to the research process, despite having little experience, and shows how every individual has unique insight to give. Particularly, by undergoing education in the current socio-political climate, the other students and I were able to advise the team of some previously unconsidered beliefs and trends, as well as interact with different audiences through our networks to enhance sample size. This not only gave the team more confidence in generating target

areas but also an important glimpse into how in a growing digital and multi-cultural setting, counselling needs are changing between both groups and cultures.

Dzulfikaar Sutander

During the project, I contributed to designing and implementing the data collection strategy with the team. My responsibilities included developing and distributing the questionnaire via Qualtrics (with Prachi). Following this, I provided the initial descriptive statistics, covering demographic details, awareness of group programs, and the preferred methods of communication among different student groups.

Te Meng

Overall, my experiences with these two SSP projects have been incredible. They provided excellent opportunities to explore students' real perceptions of the university's counselling programs. It was quite surprising to realise that most students are unaware of the various types of group-based counselling programs; they only knew about the individual counselling program. This indicates a significant gap in the promotion of these various counselling services to students, highlighting the need for increased efforts to raise awareness. Students reported a desire for more group-based programs, which the counselling team could consider incorporating into their current offerings.

Throughout this project, I learned how to use the "Slack" platform for conducting meetings and "SurveyMonkey" for designing questionnaires. I also developed skills in drafting professional survey reports and presenting them to staff partners. Working with the counsellors at UQ was an eye-opening experience, providing me with valuable insights into their perspectives on the counselling programs and their approaches to research projects.

I believe this SSP project has offered excellent insights into my future career path as an aspiring therapist. It demonstrated the necessity of conducting research and presenting findings at conferences. This project gave me the opportunity to work in a professional setting, define project goals, gather data, and complete a final report. It has prepared me for my future career, helping me understand my responsibilities in the workplace.

Discussion

These results provide valuable and unique data, leading to a number of important considerations. Firstly, there are valuable data from students aged from 18 to 24 years, and from 25 to 34 years in both language groups, but a lack of data from students aged 35 years and over. The lack of representation of this cohort in the dataset is an important focus for future research. Potential research should target higher degree students who are in this cohort and who rated the lowest in responses by program type. A greater gender balance would also be a beneficial focus in future research to provide more accurate data.

Several key themes have emerged from this project. Around 40% of students were aware of the wellbeing programs, indicating a need for ongoing promotion. Effective marketing was impacted by the overload of information that students reported receiving. This included university advertising in relation to a variety of diverse activities and events across multiple platforms, both online and in print (for example, social media, newsletters, and websites). Students referenced this marketing as being overwhelming. The impact of overload is understood and often communicated to students who access the counselling service. The balance between information provision and overwhelm presents a unique challenge—how do we advertise services that will benefit students, in a timely manner, and not contribute to information fatigue?

It is positive that around 45% of students were aware of wellbeing programs through word of mouth (Chinese language), but this was only around 15% for the English language survey. More work in promoting the programs to students and to UQ academic and support staff with student contact would be beneficial. Social media, especially Instagram and WeChat could be utilised more effectively in the promotion of the wellbeing programs.

Service confusion was identified. Students reported that they were unaware of the difference between the UQ Counselling service, external mental health support, and the role of the group programs in relation to mental illness versus mental wellbeing. This has specific implications for the promotion of programs, including a distinction between individual counselling linked to the management of mental health issues, compared to the preventative goal of the programs. There is an opportunity to communicate that counselling support can meet both immediate and longer-term needs whilst also fostering the development of skills students can utilise to support study success and future goal achievement.

Several recommendations were suggested by participants. Students expressed a desire for more sessions outside of class times. UQ Counselling recognises that the clash between timetabled classes and the group programs has historically been challenging. The desire for different timing came predominantly from responses of first- and second-year students, rather than PhD students who often have more flexibility with their time. It was also recommended that programs be more culturally adjusted. The differences in responses between the English and Chinese language surveys highlight that, while several needs are similar, inclusion of more culturally appropriate content and marketing would be beneficial. The need for culturally adjusted marketing and programming is especially critical as more international students engage in study in Australia. Reminders of upcoming program sessions and opportunities to provide feedback were also recommended, a process that some programs have been implementing to date. These changes could help to create a more interactive and responsive environment, which, in turn, could enhance student engagement and satisfaction with the services.

Students recommended that programs include more specific titles (for example, procrastination help), and more degree-specific support. Increased engagement between students and counsellors was also suggested. This will increase the opportunity for programs to be student-driven, which will increase program promotion due to the increased word-of-mouth advertising, as identified in the results. A focus on face-to-face delivery of wellbeing programs is also a key recommendation from this research.

It is noted that the small sample size limits generalisability of results, and further research is recommended with a larger sample size. More data from students aged 25 years and older, greater gender diversity, and more responses from students in higher levels of study (especially masters and PhD) would be beneficial. More information from students from diverse groups would also be beneficial. Obtaining survey responses was a challenge in this project and is a key learning which was underestimated in the early stages of the project.

Beyond the data, the project is a success as the first Student-Staff Partnership project for the UQ Counselling team. The results obtained are therefore unique and vital. Feedback from the student partners highlights the ability for them to gain skills that are helpful to their program completion and future career success, especially group work, problem solving, research design and implementation, networking, and collaboration. Having students contribute to the development of wellbeing programs now and into the future is a successful outcome of this collaborative project.

The collaboration was extremely beneficial to the counselling team, especially for the two counsellors involved. While key challenges included moving from practitioner to scientist, interaction with the student partners was incredibly informative regarding the research process. An

additional challenge was finding the time to be actively involved in the project and being available in a timely manner between individual appointments, facilitating wellbeing programs, and project meetings. This is indicative of the challenges faced by all university counselling services. We appreciate the student partners' patience in this regard. The opportunity to collaborate with the student partners, to share ideas, and negotiate responsibilities and tasks based on their skills allowed the project to not only achieve goals, but to exercise the value of collaboration, open and honest communication, respect, mutual growth and understanding, and trust. This was a two-way learning process that will have positive implications for the counselling service and UQ students, in the short and long term.

Acknowledgments

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Please cite this paper as: