

Editorial: Beyond Crisis Response and Toward a Culture of Student Wellbeing

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Across the tertiary education landscape, few areas of focus have been as enduring or as pressing as student mental health and wellbeing. Those of us working in student services have long understood that academic success is deeply interconnected with the broader wellbeing of the students we serve.

Research into student engagement has reinforced this understanding. Kahu's concept of the educational interface highlights that a student's personal context, including their mental health, financial security, family responsibilities, and sense of belonging, directly shapes their capacity to succeed in their studies (Kahu, 2013). When students face stress, exclusion, or financial hardship, their ability to engage fully with learning is significantly impacted. Supporting the whole student is not an optional extra; it is fundamental to success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Today, this understanding is even more urgent. Students are navigating a complex and rapidly changing world. Many are managing the rising cost of living, balancing study with part-time or full-time work, and transitioning from increasingly diverse educational pathways into tertiary education. In this context, it is no longer enough for institutions to simply offer health and wellbeing services. We must work to reshape our institutional cultures and embed wellbeing as a visible and core part of the tertiary education experience. Wellbeing is no longer a "nice to have" but must be woven throughout a student's learning journey, rather than being something accessed only in times of crisis.

Across Australia and New Zealand, tertiary institutions are beginning to respond. One important shift has been the move from standalone support services towards embedding wellbeing across all aspects of student life. There is a growing focus on proactive strategies. These include peer-led models of support; early intervention programs, such as universal mental health screening and broader efforts to address financial stability; and housing and social inclusion, alongside mental health. Institutions are also placing greater emphasis on culturally safe practices and on targeted support for specific groups, including international students, students with disability, LGBTIQ+ students, and students with caregiving responsibilities. Increasingly, student voice and partnership are at the heart of this work. Students are now co-designing initiatives with staff to ensure that wellbeing programs are accessible, culturally relevant, and genuinely responsive to the needs of students.

Overall, we are seeing a shift away from reactive models towards more systemic, student-centred approaches. There is growing recognition that creating the conditions for students to thrive requires a whole-of-institution commitment that protects against harm, promotes resilience and inclusion, and embeds support within the everyday fabric of students' lives.

As a result, this issue could not be more timely. Each of the authors explores student health and wellbeing from a range of important and interconnected angles.

We begin with Wilson's powerful reflection on how rethinking tertiary education through an Indigenous relational lens could transform our approach. Wilson invites us to move beyond individualistic models of learning and support towards a community-centred worldview, where connection to each other, to Country, and to broader systems of care is seen as central to education and learning. It is a call for a more holistic and courageous vision for education, one that speaks not only to student wellbeing but also to the broader societal wellbeing that tertiary institutions have a role in nurturing.

The issue also brings together a series of studies that highlight both challenges and innovations in supporting the whole student. Ganon and Kos's review of Student Disability Collectives shows how vibrant, student-led structures can foster advocacy, peer support, and greater equity but also reveals structural barriers that risk leaving vulnerable students without a collective voice. Browne and Pidgeon's study of Senior Student Affairs Officers in Canada sheds light on the evolving leadership competencies needed to support increasingly diverse student populations, while also highlighting the challenges in translating awareness into systemic change.

Cole, Navin, and Reid's case study of The Living Room at Edith Cowan University reminds us of the potential of low-barrier, peer-led mental health initiatives. Their findings show that when support is accessible, non-judgemental, and culturally safe, students are more willing to seek help early and are better positioned to succeed.

Other contributions extend the focus beyond the campus. Burge and colleagues outline Deakin University's efforts to ensure safer and more respectful placement experiences, recognising that student wellbeing must extend into professional environments. Research by Hasking, Robinson, and Tonta on universal suicide risk screening offers a model for systemic early intervention that aims to identify and support students well before they reach a point of crisis. Owen, Kavanagh, and LaMontagne explore the individual and community determinants of psychological distress among university students. Their contribution highlights the critical importance of addressing financial stress, housing satisfaction, employment stability, and social inclusion as part of a comprehensive approach to student mental health.

Finally, Hienekamp, Jones, and Meng from The University of Queensland demonstrate the critical importance of listening to students when designing wellbeing initiatives. Their work through a student-staff partnership model shows how responsive, culturally inclusive, and well-promoted programs can help to build the mental wealth of our student communities.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue strengthen the understanding that supporting student mental health and wellbeing is about more than services and interventions. It requires a cultural shift that places wellbeing at the centre of education and recognises it as a core enabler of student engagement, learning, and success.

These are not easy times. However, as Wilson reminds us, they are also times full of possibility. If we are willing to centre relationality, to listen deeply to the lived experiences of our students, and to act holistically with both care and courage, we can create the conditions where all students, not just some, can thrive.

Professor Caroline Rueckert

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