

A Health and Wellbeing Toolkit: Building Staff Capacity to Support the Mental Health and Wellbeing of University Students

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Abstract

The mental health and wellbeing of university students has become a more prominent issue in recent decades. Various factors contribute to student mental health challenges, such as developmental transitions, belonging to equity groups, and specific fields of study. As universities prioritise student mental health and wellbeing, there is a need for resources and training to enhance the ability of professional and academic staff to provide appropriate support. To build staff capacity and confidence in recognising and responding to students experiencing psychological distress, a regional Australian university developed a health and wellbeing toolkit. The toolkit provides information and resources on various topics, including identifying warning signs, managing mental health conditions, responding to disclosures of harassment or assault, and implementing inclusive learning environments. The toolkit will continue to evolve based on staff and student feedback and usage. It is fostering a shared understanding of the role all staff can play in supporting student mental health and wellbeing, as part of a broader university strategy to maintain mentally healthy campuses. By providing a comprehensive yet easy to use resource, the toolkit is a significant advancement in the University's efforts to equip all staff to support the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Keywords

Student wellbeing, Staff capacity building, Mental health and wellbeing, Health promoting university

Introduction

University counselling services continue to report an increase in the number of students presenting with complex mental health needs (Andrews, 2019; Broglia et al., 2018). A study at one Australian university reported 25% of students experienced severe or extremely severe psychological distress (Larcombe et al., 2016). A number of interrelated psychosocial and academic factors can lead to a university student experiencing psychological distress. These may include the developmental transition from adolescent to adult, belonging to an equity group (First-in-Family, mature aged, First Nations, students with disability, carers, LGBTIQ+, regional and remote, and low socioeconomic status), specific professional fields of practice, and international student status (Larcombe et al., 2016; Orygen, 2020; Pascoe et al., 2020; Sharp & Theiler, 2018).

University student support and help seeking behaviours

Universities offer a variety of student-specific support services that can positively impact the health and wellbeing of students, staff, and the broader community. In doing so, “universities become organisations in and through which to create and improve health and wellbeing” (Newton et al., 2016, pp. 57–58). However, accessing student support requires students to engage in help seeking. For some students, help seeking can be challenging, particularly if it is for counselling support. Barriers to students accessing counselling support include stigma, embarrassment, negative perceptions, and concerns about confidentiality and trust in the therapist (Radez et al., 2021; Salaheddin & Mason, 2016).

Healthy university settings

University leaders and managers are paying greater attention to the impact of student health and wellbeing on academic success and student retention (Dooris et al., 2020). Healthy university settings create conditions for students to achieve positive social and learning outcomes (Baik et al., 2019). Universities in Australia are moving toward a whole of university approach to supporting student mental health. This “healthy university settings” approach is well-advanced in the UK and Canada, with many examples of universities moving beyond isolated services and interventions to address the broad determinants of student mental health and wellbeing (Hughes & Byrom, 2019).

Australian universities are broadening their approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing. The Higher Education Standards Panel (2018) recommended every university should have a mental health strategy. In response to this recommendation, the Australian Government funded the development of the *Australian University Mental Health Framework* (Orygen, 2020) to provide universities with guidance on strategies for creating mentally healthy university settings. One initiative in the University of the Sunshine Coast’s (UniSC) *Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy* (2021) is a health and wellbeing toolkit to assist academic and professional staff in supporting students.

Why a toolkit?

While universities provide high-quality counselling services, it is often the administrative, professional, and academic staff, rather than counselling services, who will be the first to encounter students experiencing psychological distress or presenting with concerning, confusing, or challenging behaviours (Gulliver et al., 2018; McAllister et al., 2014). In addition, the emphasis on student-centred approaches to higher education has seen a shift in academic roles from solely providing “education” to include relationship and capacity building with students (Baik et al. 2019; Tormey, 2021). It is with this understanding that the UniSC *Health and Wellbeing Toolkit* was developed. The purpose of the toolkit is to build staff capacity and confidence to recognise and respond to signs of student distress and increase the academic success of our students.

We developed the toolkit to be evidence-based, practical, accessible, and user-friendly. University staff are often time poor, so we aimed to produce a resource that provided them with the information and resources they needed to respond purposefully and promptly to a student’s psychological distress, and to develop learning environments and practices that support the health and wellbeing of students through to graduation. By providing a comprehensive yet easy-to-use resource, the toolkit is a significant advancement in the University’s efforts to equip all staff to support the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Benefits of capacity building in university staff

Despite efforts to promote support services and encourage help seeking, many students with mental health challenges do not seek professional support from university counselling services or external mental health supports. In a survey at one Australian university, almost half of the domestic students and over a third of international students reported not seeking help when they felt they needed mental health and wellbeing support (Skromanis et al., 2018). The only guaranteed engagement between students and their university is with academic staff and the curriculum (Hughes & Byrom, 2019). While academic staff may not consider supporting student mental health as part of their role (Hughes & Byrom, 2019), students are more likely to initially seek support from academic and other professional staff than from a counsellor (Gulliver et al., 2018; McAllister et al., 2014). Staff may not have the confidence or feel they lack support from their university to provide appropriate support to students (Hughes & Byrom, 2019; McAllister et al., 2014). As part of a “whole of university” response to supporting student mental health and wellbeing (Orygen, 2020), there is a need for specific resources and training to support academic and professional staff

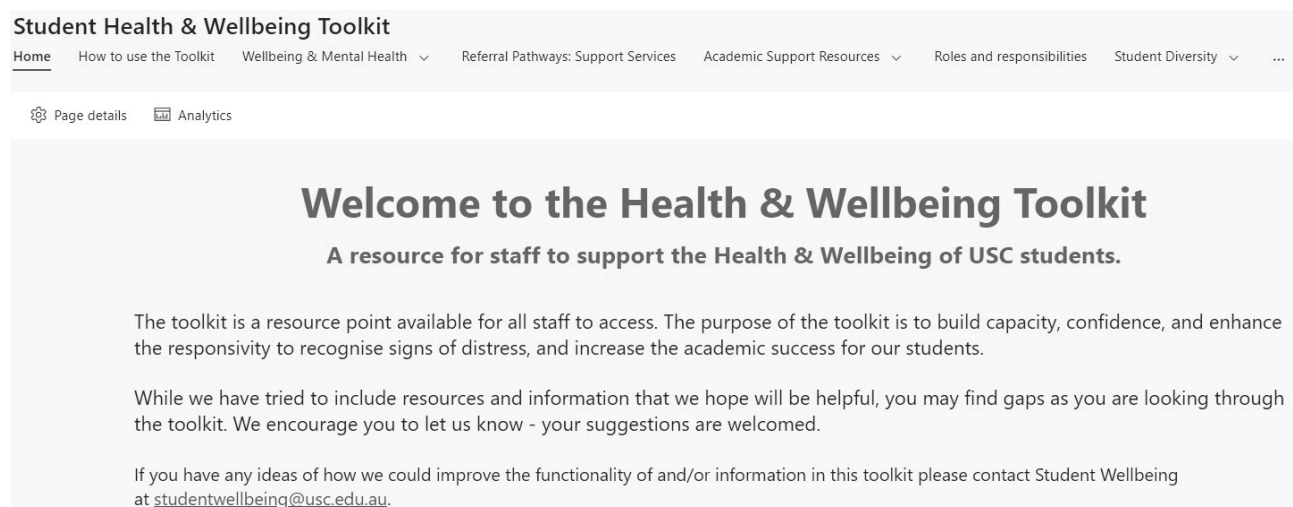
to respond appropriately to students facing mental health challenges (Gulliver et al., 2018; McAllister et al., 2014). Greater mental health literacy, such as distinguishing between temporary emotional stress and persistent mental health challenges, may lead to more confidence to provide appropriate support (Hughes & Byrom, 2019; McAllister et al., 2014).

Evolution of the development of a health and wellbeing toolkit

The University of the Highlands and Islands *Mental Health Conditions Toolkit* (n.d.) inspired us to establish a toolkit. Two counsellors initiated the development of the toolkit, outlining the structure and initial content for inclusion, and inviting university staff and students to be members of the co-design team. The team consisted of students, academics, counsellors, a web accessibility specialist, a disability adviser, a student who identified as LGBTIQ, a First Nations person, and a student success adviser. Together, we worked to develop and refine content with the counsellors taking the primary lead in designing, importing links/videos/graphics, and finessing the content. As part of the collaboration with students to co-design the toolkit, we also employed creative design students to create the toolkit graphics based on their understanding of specific mental health conditions. The toolkit was reviewed by a colleague who provided feedback on its content and accessibility. The toolkit took approximately 12 months to complete, with the two counsellors devoting time to the project while maintaining their full-time counsellor workloads. The toolkit was created in the Microsoft SharePoint platform and launched onto the UniSC staff intranet in July 2021 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Health and Wellbeing Toolkit Landing Page



What is in the toolkit

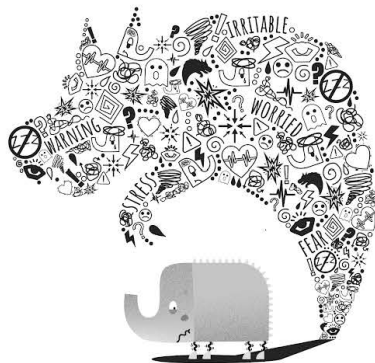
For students who are experiencing psychological distress, it is helpful for university staff to have a foundational understanding of how this may manifest and impact the student's ability to participate effectively in their education. Additionally, when staff are responsive and relate to a student's needs, the likelihood of the student feeling heard and supported and remaining enrolled increases (Tormey, 2021). The toolkit provides information, case studies and real-life student examples, videos, and statistics on topic areas to guide staff (Table 1). The layout of each page was designed to be engaging and provide easy navigation to clearly defined sections of information, as well as links to more resources on each topic (Figure 2).

Table 1

Health and Wellbeing Toolkit Topic Descriptors

Topic Descriptors
Early Warning Signs: Identify distress in students
Difficult Conversations: Responding to psychologically unwell students
Managing Emotions and Behaviour: Supporting students in distress
Managing Specific Mental Health Conditions: What is it? What does it look/feel like?
Responding to Sexual Assault and Harassment: Disclosure and support
Dealing with Challenging Behaviours: Strategies for handling difficult students
Universal Design for Learning: Innovative activities and examples
Wellbeing Embedded in Curriculum: Achieving curriculum integration
Psychoeducation on Diversity: Building an inclusive and safe learning environment
Confidentiality vs. Duty of Care: Understanding boundaries and implications
UniSC Policies and Support: Important policies and available support
Importance of Self-Care: Promoting wellbeing among UniSC staff
Psychoeducation Resources: Training, workshops, tip sheets, and videos
Referral Pathways: Internal and external support for students

Figure 2
Example Toolkit Page



An important aspect of the toolkit was to contextualise the teaching and learning environment to reflect the socioeconomic and cultural aspects of the broader Australian community. We did this by providing an example of a tutorial with 20 students and the lived experiences students are likely to bring to the university setting (Table 2).

Table 2

An Example of Student Diversity in University Tutorial Classes

Demographics of an example tutorial class
6 female students who have experienced physical assault after the age of 15
4 students who have experienced a mental health condition in any given year
2 or 3 students who live in poverty
2 students who identify as LGBTIQ+
1 student who identifies as First Nations

We also included UniSC-specific data on students who identified as having a disability, First Nations, First-in-Family, and/or international students.

COVID impact and need to respond

The public health measures implemented to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns and closed borders, required many universities that would normally provide face-to-face education to shift to an online, technology enabled learning environment. UniSC was no different. In the technology enabled learning space, the toolkit became a vital resource for staff working from home as it provided a central portal for staff to support students. The technology enabled learning environment caused some students to struggle with the etiquette and ethical expectations/boundaries of online classes and group chats. This was an emerging challenge for staff and provided the opportunity to use the toolkit to share behaviour management strategies specific to the technology enabled learning environment.

Are staff using the toolkit?

In the almost two years since the toolkit was first published, there have been 11,794 page views by 793 staff (the equivalent of two-thirds of the current total staff). The current average duration of each visit is approximately two minutes. The most popular category has been the support resources for academic staff, which includes a guide for referral pathways to support services, and information on how to request a student welfare check. Of the 16 mental health and wellbeing topics, autism spectrum disorder and anxiety have recorded the most views (Table 3).

Table 3

Health and Wellbeing Toolkit Site Usage, Selective Data July 2021–May 2023

Category	Total views	Most viewed pages
Academic support resources	2364	Referral pathways = 621 Welfare checks = 246
Mental health and wellbeing	1857	Autism spectrum disorder = 277 Anxiety = 233
Student diversity	793	International students = 233 LGBTIQ+ students = 186

What is next

The toolkit remains a dynamic and evolving resource for staff, with suggestions for improvement and additions encouraged. It is hoped that continued refinement and usage of the toolkit will

enhance professional and academic staff's understanding of the broad determinants of student mental health and wellbeing, and the ways in which staff can support students. A growing area of interest among academic and professional staff is working collaboratively to embed mental health and wellbeing resources and activities in the curriculum. Adding more curriculum embedded resources to the toolkit may support this work. As it is almost two years since implementation, a comprehensive evaluation is planned to help inform any improvements to the toolkit's layout and contents. It is hoped a refreshed and updated toolkit will continue to build staff capacity to support student mental health and wellbeing.

Implications for higher education

Incorporating a health and wellbeing toolkit into a broader university student health and wellbeing strategy can have a positive impact on students, staff, and a university's strategic objectives. For students, the toolkit contributes to enhanced support by equipping staff to recognise potential signs of psychological distress, and the confidence to provide students with support or referral to appropriate support and resources. Students who feel mentally supported are more likely to engage in class and university life. For staff, the toolkit's resources are designed to build confidence and capacity to support students in distress, and provide signposts to easily accessible referral pathways to specialist support services. For a university, a proactive approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing may enhance its reputation in the community, supporting the university's objectives for student recruitment, retention, and academic success.

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