



RESEARCH PAPER

Embedding mental wellbeing in Australian regional universities: Equity interventions

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Student wellbeing is an important issue to address because research shows that a high percentage of Australian university students experience mental health problems and that higher numbers are found in equity groups. Research also shows that regional universities have a higher percentage of students from equity groups. This paper outlines findings from a study of regional university students and mental health interventions that combined a desktop survey of web-based university resources and an integrative review of relevant literature. Our findings show that most Australian universities do not integrate their mental wellbeing support into the curriculum and that mental health professionals and educators typically work in silos. Consequently, universities only have limited success in addressing student wellbeing needs. We argue that there is a need to draw on best practice for embedding academic support as part of inclusive pedagogies and curricula, in order to extend these to include mental wellbeing support. This study is significant as it is the first to synthesise the key principles of effective embedded wellbeing support in relation to regional university contexts.

Keywords: mental wellbeing; embedded support; regional universities; equity students

Introduction

Enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of students at universities is of importance because it is an often overlooked feature of higher education. In 2017, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, also known as Orygen, released a report outlining significant gaps in research regarding the mental health and wellbeing needs of Australian university students. According to the report, *Under the radar: The mental health of Australian university students*, one in four students between 15 and 24 years of age experience mental health issues (Orygen, 2017). Therefore, it is estimated that over 210,000 university students in Australia will experience mental health issues in one calendar year. Financial stress, lack of sleep and poor diet due to balancing work and family responsibilities and/or isolation from family and support networks are part of the university experience for many students (Orygen, 2017). Higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of mental health and wellbeing within the university student population, as opposed to the general population, were well recognised prior to the recommendation by Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales (2008) to increase numbers from equity groups (Stallman, 2008). Since students from equity groups are likely to have additional challenges affecting their studies, this places additional demands on universities (Nelson et al.,

2017).

Research also shows that rural and regional students are at particularly high risk of psychological distress (Mulder & Cashin, 2015). Students at regional universities may face additional challenges affecting their studies and their wellbeing such as further distance to travel, higher travel or accommodation costs and lack of online access. In addition, a higher percentage of students from equity groups, including low socioeconomic status (SES) students, rural students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with a disability, study at regional universities than in capital cities. Universities, including regional universities, are increasingly targeting students from equity groups, which indicates an increased level of support is likely to be needed. Therefore, the study on which this paper is based focused on examining initiatives based in regional Australian university settings and the relevant literature.

The Orygen (2017) report argues that the responsibility of recognising and responding to these needs requires a coordinated and integrated approach across many sections of society. However, the report shows that although staff working to support students with mental health and wellbeing issues are aware of the need for integration, students' wellbeing needs often remain unmet. A clear reason is that, in the majority of universities, the services that support students work in silos away from academic staff (Orygen, 2017). Additionally, focusing on either general wellbeing or mental health as two disparate areas, fosters a deficit approach to meeting mental wellbeing needs due to the pathologising of mental health. Hence, in this paper, we explore the ways in which support for *mental wellbeing* has been embedded, such as in curriculum materials or pedagogy, or integrated within universities outside of the silos of support.

A number of studies have explored the mental health and wellbeing needs of students within universities (e.g. Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa & Barkham, 2010; Larcombe et al., 2014; Schofield, O'Halloran, McLean, Forrester-Knauss & Paxton, 2016; Stallman, 2008; 2010). The literature describes some predictors of mental health and wellbeing in the student population (e.g. Bore, Pittolo, Kirby, Dluzewska & Marlin, 2016; Larcombe et al.; Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts & Chen, 2009) as well as describing interventions, such as software or web resources that have been developed to assist students with their wellbeing. There are also a number of small scale studies evaluating existing interventions (e.g. Call, Miron & Orcutt, 2013; Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley & Audin, 2006; Julal, 2016; McSharry & Timmins, 2016; Ryan, Shochet & Stallman, 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Stallman & Hurst, 2011; Stallman, Kavanagh, Arklay & Bennett-Levy, 2016). Insights gained from literature concerned with embedded *academic* support, especially for certain students, including equity students, first-in-family, and even first year students more generally, are useful. The literature on embedded academic support provides a roadmap for the embedding of mental wellbeing support. However, while there is a considerable body of literature on embedding academic support into the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, there are only limited studies on the value of embedded mental wellbeing support (see Beccaria, Rogers, Burton & Beccaria, 2016; Everett, 2015; Stallman & King, 2016). Stallman and King (2016) promote a 'team approach' towards mental health in the university context, but provide no details on how to include academics in this team approach. Likewise, Beccaria et al. (2016) highlight the importance of mental wellbeing support that addresses both social and academic demands both in face-to-face and online modalities, but are light on detail on how this could be achieved. Everett (2015) provides suggestions on one pedagogical strategy to address mental wellbeing in the university classroom, but does not address how counselling, professional and academic staff can work together to facilitate this pedagogy.

Despite the promising work described above, to our knowledge, no study has combined a review of literature on equity, widening participation and student mental wellbeing needs specific to regional university settings. In addition, no study has explored these issues in conjunction with a desktop review of how regional Australian universities are attempting to address these needs while using literature to develop principles for effective support in this context. The aims of this paper are therefore as follows:

To outline key literature on the mental wellbeing needs of students from equity groups in Australian regional universities.

To synthesise literature on embedding academic support as part of inclusive pedagogies and curricula.

To synthesise literature on programs that embed mental wellbeing for regional university students and the evaluation thereof.

Methodology

The study on which this paper is based synthesised research pertaining to regional university students and mental health interventions that have been utilised to support the needs of these students via an integrative review. It combined this with a desktop survey of web-based university resources in relation to the current embedded practices in regional Australian universities. An integrative review synthesises research with various methodologies and uses both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach is also particularly useful in practice-based disciplines such as (higher) education and psychology (Shepperd et al., 2009; Smith, Devane, Begley & Clarke, 2011; Stewart & Oliver, 2012; Thomas & Harden, 2008; Torraco, 2016).

Criteria for selecting studies

In order to synthesise literature pertinent to the mental wellbeing of university students in regional contexts, we have examined a broad range of research including published reports from universities, research centres and government departments as well as academic journal articles. The latter include theoretical articles, case studies and empirical (qualitative and quantitative) research articles.

Search strategy

For the academic journal articles, we conducted an extensive search of journal databases using the keywords of wellbeing and mental health in combination with the following words: university education; universities; higher education; regional university/universities; Australian university; widening participation; equity; embedded support; embedded mental health support. We also used Google Scholar for longer strings of key words as well as key Psychology (ProQuest; Ovid) and Education (EBSCO; ERIC; Taylor and Francis) search engines. For recent developments in equity and widening participation in higher education in Australia, we focussed our attention on reports by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) (e.g. Lisciandro, Jones & Strehlow, 2016; NCSEHE, 2017; Nelson et al., 2017; Pitman et al., 2016).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We focussed only on journal articles, reports and initiatives in the higher education context with emphasis on the Australian context with websites and reports. In terms of journal articles, we included international studies where relevant and focussed on recent research articles between 2012 and 2018. However, some earlier highly cited studies were also included because they were

frequently cited in more recent literature.

Data synthesis principles

The literature was synthesised based on the three aims of the study. Then, key themes were discussed and the findings of all the reviewed literature were synthesised into three key principles for embedding mental wellbeing support into the curricula of a regional university.

Criteria for selecting websites for desktop review

We conducted a desktop review of regional Australian universities between April and June 2018 to determine whether mental wellbeing was integrated into primary website pages. The Orygen (2017) report provides a comprehensive evaluation of mental wellbeing support in Australian higher education, and therefore we drew on this report to identify types of and explored the websites of regional Australian universities for descriptions of programs and support in order to evaluate whether they are embedded in teaching and learning practices. We also identified products, such as *thedesk*, commonly used by several Australian institutions, and explored the descriptions of these from the perspective of embedding support into the curriculum.

Universities were determined as regional based on the definition of ‘all of the towns, small cities and areas that lie beyond the major capital cities’ of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Canberra (Regional Australian Institute, 2017). Based on this definition, city-based universities that had campuses in regional areas were included in the review. Mental wellbeing support was deemed to be embedded, if it was available via any information other than that found on the university’s counselling or support service pages.

Findings

Mental wellbeing needs of students from equity groups in a regional university

Our review of the literature shows very few articles focused specifically on the mental wellbeing needs of students from equity groups in regional universities. Only five articles focused specifically on this cohort (Bore et al., 2016; Grimes, Scevak, Southgate & Buchanan, 2017; Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench & King, 2015; Mulder & Cashin, 2015; Said, Kypri & Bowman, 2013). Key findings from these studies were that high and very high distress levels were reported by more than half of all students within regional universities (Mulder & Cashin, 2015) and that many students experience poor mental wellbeing (Bore et al., 2016; Grimes et al., 2017; Said et al., 2013). These results are even more pronounced than those reported in the Orygen (2017) report.

Another key finding is that mental health issues are often associated with equity issues in this context. For example, students in regional contexts tended to have more learning challenges (Grimes et al., 2017) and less protective factors (e.g. parental and peer support) supporting their resilience (Bore et al., 2016; Mulder & Cashin, 2015). Students with mental wellbeing issues are more likely to be the first-in-family to attend university and therefore lack knowledge on how to operate within the higher education environment. The importance of this systematic knowledge is supported by data that shows mental health issues are more prevalent among undergraduate than postgraduate students who have had more time to acclimatise to the university environment (Mulder & Cashin, 2015; Said et al., 2013). They also tended to have lower previous education levels. In addition, they are less likely to be living at home with supportive parents or in committed relationships. Although the proportion of mental wellbeing issues was high amongst all students, gender had an impact on the nature of how these issues were experienced. Female students reported higher levels of depression, anxiety and eating disorders, male students reported higher levels of harmful consumption of alcohol, and LGBTQIA students reported

higher levels of all of the above (Said et al., 2013).

The most concerning finding in the literature is that disabilities, particularly those that are mental health related, are significantly under-reported by students. As a consequence, institutions are unable to strategically respond to students with these needs on a targeted basis (Grimes et al., 2017). It has been suggested that the ‘stigma’ of mental health may be the reason that the extent of students experiencing mental health conditions is underrepresented in the data (Grimes et al., 2017; Yap, Wright & Jorm, 2011).

Although our review of the literature focused on articles specifically related to the mental wellbeing of regional students, information on this cohort can be implied from a number of other studies. Since the release of the Bradley Report (2008), which recommended an increase in students from equity groups accessing and completing university study, there have been suggestions that the Australian university system is under resourced to facilitate the inclusion of these students in meaningful and appropriate educational outcomes. This appears to also be the case with regard to mental wellbeing, which affects mental health outcomes. Because of the under-reporting of mental health issues and the particularly high prevalence in regional contexts, a strong argument can be made that mental wellbeing support needs to be *mainstreamed* in regional contexts.

Embedding academic support as part of inclusive pedagogies and curricula

In this paper, we focus particularly on articles describing best practice for embedded academic support for high needs students, within regional universities. However, since we were able to locate very few studies specifically addressing regional universities, we also explored studies that addressed best practice in academic support for students from equity groups. A key concept in the literature over the past ten years is the notion of ‘transition pedagogy’ to describe the overarching approach to supporting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Devlin & O’Shea, 2012; Kift, 2009; Marr, Nicoll, von Treuer, Kolar & Palermo, 2013; McKay & Devlin, 2014; 2016). In transition pedagogy, the focus is on assisting students to achieve based on *their* needs rather than academics’ expectations. Rather than expecting students to already have the social and cultural capital and academic skills necessary to successfully complete their studies, supportive universities instead aim to ‘demystify’ academic cultures and skills (McKay & Devlin, 2014) by creating an environment that fosters a sense of ‘belonging’ among students irrespective of their background (Devlin & O’Shea, 2012; Kift, 2009; Marr et al., 2013).

The use of transition pedagogies also mean that students from equity groups are meaningfully supported within the university context through embedded academic support as part of a mainstreamed, inclusive curriculum. Instead of emphasising that students come from equity groups and providing support based on such things as ‘disability’ or demographics, transition pedagogies mean that diversity is valued using a ‘strengths-based approach’ and drawn upon to enhance the learning experience for all (Devlin, 2009; Devlin & O’Shea, 2012; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Thomas, 2014). The literature suggests that this can occur by explicitly integrating the expertise and life experience of students into the curriculum (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Zemits & Hodson, 2016). However, for this to happen, a ‘whole institution’ approach is required that is integrated, coordinated and coherent and which allows “flexibility for diverse cohorts” (Kift, 2009, p. 3).

In order to achieve effective strengths-based transition pedagogies, the literature suggests that the systematic embedding of academic skills into all courses helps increase student confidence and is particularly helpful for students with hidden or undisclosed learning difficulties or

disabilities that affect their studies (Colbert & Arboleda, 2016; Maldoni & Lear, 2016). Mainstreaming academic support means that the lecturers and tutors, whose enthusiasm and support has been shown to have the most significant impact on student learning, are important providers of academic support (Colbert & Arboleda, 2016; Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Maldoni & Lear, 2016; Taffs & Holt, 2013). However, academic staff or discipline experts require the support of learning experts in a genuine collegial and “sustainable partnership” (Kift, 2009, p. 3). That is, the discipline experts can provide the key content and context for skills development, while the learning experts can provide the skills development resources and support. Learning experts can also help upskill discipline staff in academic skills development (Kift, 2009; Maldoni & Lear, 2016; Roberts, 2018).

Maldoni and Lear (2016), in their reflection on ten years of embedded academic skills development at their regional university, note that the strong partnership between discipline experts and learning experts (and even team teaching of some content) enables students to feel comfortable and support-seeking behaviours are normalised. This embedded support is even more successful when what Baker, Ramsey, Irwin and Miles (2017) call ‘warm’ support is provided. This support is formally structured and systematically embedded, and provided by familiar trusted people in safe places. This approach is most effective when social support through peer and informal networks is provided alongside academic support (Gervasoni, Smith, & Howard, 2013; Henderson & Noble, 2013; Huntly & Donovan, 2009; Pearce & Down, 2011; Wilks, Fleeton & Wilson, 2017).

Besides embedding a partnership of learning and disciplinary experts into all courses, the literature on best practice in academic skills development highlights the need for embedding into the curriculum and teaching resources of courses. Drawing on John Biggs’ (2014) concept of ‘constructive alignment’ which aligns learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment items, Larkin and Richardson (2013) suggest embedding academic skills and support into curriculum learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment items as part of a process of normalising support.

Even when there is no physical presence of learning support in the classroom, as is often the case in online learning environments, academic skills resources referred to by discipline experts at key points and embedded into the curriculum enhance student learning and experience (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Taffs & Holt, 2013). Studies on the development of specific skills (e.g. writing, reading, information literacy and public speaking) demonstrate that embedding academic skills into the curriculum and resources of a course helps to enhance student confidence and learning (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Nash, Crimmins & Oprescu, 2016; Rahanu et al., 2016).

We could find only three articles that focussed specifically on academic skills development at Australian regional universities. Gervasoni, Smith and Howard (2013) highlight the need for socially embedded structures to support learning. Henderson and Noble (2013) also emphasise the need for social support alongside traditionally offered academic support. More recently, Sadowski, Stewart and Padiaditis (2018) have suggested that a consistent academic skills approach across courses with transparent scaffolding and support alongside mandatory and mainstreamed orientation and involvement of learning experts as well as peer support and connectedness are vital for student support at regional universities.

Integrated support for mental wellbeing of university students

Unlike the embedding of academic support, which has for the most part become mainstreamed in the Australian university context, embedding mental wellbeing information and promoting

the mental wellbeing needs of students is not standard practice across institutions. This is in spite of the fact that recent, in-depth research has called for an embedded approach to better support the needs of students and staff in higher education (Baik et al., 2017). A desktop review of Australian regional universities' websites undertaken in April and May 2018 found that only four reflected an embedded approach towards the integration of mental wellbeing support. More often mental wellbeing information was only found by locating the university's counselling information or searching for the keywords of 'wellbeing' 'support' or 'counselling' (Devlin, 2009; Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Thomas, 2014). University sites also vary in the degree of information available, some offering details on how to make an appointment, and others offering a variety of resources available either online or face-to-face. Our search revealed that some had inactive links.

Where programs have been developed to support the mental wellbeing of students, these more often take place as separate workshops or one off seminars (e.g. Regehr, Glancy & Pitts, 2013; Stallman et al., 2016). While many of these programs have been effective, they rely on students self-referring and attending sessions in a realm that is 'separate' from the academic, which does not normalise mental wellbeing and only serves to promote a deficit notion of help seeking. Given that embedding resources to support the mental wellbeing of students is not standard practice within institutional frameworks, it is therefore not surprising that this information is also not included in the curriculum (Lisciandro et al., 2016). However, some programs have been developed in the international context (e.g. Call et al., 2013; Everett, 2015; Häfner, Stock, Pinneker & Ströhle, 2013; Kelly, 2017; McSharry & Timmins, 2016) and the literature outlining these initiatives has suggested that promotion of student mental wellbeing within the curriculum, has a positive impact on retention, success and staff engagement.

The positive results of these overseas initiatives has led to a handful of examples at regional Australian universities where mechanisms for embedding mental wellbeing into teaching and curriculum materials have either been piloted or developed (e.g. Lisciandro et al., 2016; Stallman, Kavanagh & Ralph, 2012). Studies of these initiatives indicate that while reports such as Orygen (2017) recommend systematic programs that embed mental wellbeing supports into university settings, yet, the methodology for successfully including this material is an area that requires significant research.

Of the websites assessed in the desktop review, four were found to have integrated mental wellbeing information. A brief summary of these websites and a popular online program, *thedesk*, are outlined below:

UniEdge Workshops – Murdoch University

Murdoch University Counselling Service runs these workshops for all students to support their mental wellbeing in areas of understanding and managing procrastination; stress; presentation anxiety; motivation and managing self-criticism. These topics validate the experiences of students in the university setting and provide resources that could be embedded into curriculum materials to promote mental wellbeing within the academic sphere.

My Journey – University of Newcastle

This webpage holds a wealth of information for students on a range of topics that may be helpful for them during their journey at the University of Newcastle. Themes covered include being prepared, belonging, learning and succeeding, with each of them being addressed at a personal,

social and academic level. Therefore, if a student takes the initiative, they will find information to support the enhancement of academic skills alongside dealing with issues such as procrastination. The links that are referred to on the website are collected from various university support services including counselling, learning development, careers and campus life.

Social Hub – University of Southern Queensland

Social Hub is a direct link easily accessible from the University of Southern Queensland's homepage that houses a wealth of current and supportive information that is embedded within the day to day life of being a student at this regional university. Guides to coping with study stress, handling procrastination, staying motivated and managing digital demands are some of the topics that were available at the time of the review. Information on Social Hub is provided by University staff, including counsellors, as well as students, and was presented in various formats including visual, written and video links.

Mentally Healthy Campus Strategy – University of Western Australia

Although not as easily accessible as some of the other integrated approaches, the University of Western Australia promotes the mental wellbeing of its students via the mentally healthy campus strategy. Links and information on being mentally healthy direct students to support services, as well as to events and programs, such as exercise classes, that are run via other areas at the university.

thedesk

thedesk (Stallman et al., 2012) is an online tool that provides resources to support mental wellbeing in university students and can be found on several regional Australian university websites, including the University of Newcastle and the University of Southern Queensland. *thedesk* is designed to be embedded in institutional materials and provide appropriate referral to services offered by individual institutions. Access is free to anyone following a registration process and funding by institutions supports institution specific components of the program (Stallman & Kavanagh, 2016). While there is interest in *thedesk* and institutions have been keen to purchase the program for student use, the program is usually available via counselling pages on university websites and knowledge of the program is often limited to counselling services within institutions and not promoted by academic staff. Additionally, staff who are promoting the program are aware that the registration process required by *thedesk* creates barriers to students accessing and utilising the included material (Stallman & Kavanagh, 2016).

It is recognised that a desktop review is in no way an exhaustive or even ideal way to review the reality of what takes place on the campuses of Australian regional universities. Indeed, several Open Access Foundation Programs, otherwise known as 'enabling programs', have implemented a more embedded approach towards mental wellbeing which are not visible via a desktop review, but which the authors became aware of through their work in enabling programs. For example, integrated mental wellbeing initiatives run at Murdoch University in its enabling programs, called *OnTrack* and *K-Track*, which have piloted embedded resources and learning opportunities within curriculum material via a variety of methods. In both *OnTrack* and *K-Track*, emotional intelligence, skill development and better academic outcomes are embedded as a one off lecture or as a series of activities. Limitations for both programs resulted from cohort size, mode of delivery and willingness for academic staff to engage in some aspects of the programs (Lisciandro et al., 2016). At the University of Newcastle, the biggest provider of enabling

programs in Australia, there is a dedicated counsellor who works closely with academic staff to embed mental wellbeing support within curriculum material. As one of the authors is that counsellor it can be seen that there are significant advantages to embedding support for the mental health needs of students within programs, however, it is crucial to recognise that this is only the start of the conversation. Embedding mental *wellbeing* within the academic space via curriculum material and learning objectives is needed if we are wanting to provide mental wellbeing support in the same way that we support the academic needs of students. The supportive nature of the enabling programs provides scope for much opportunity for support staff and academic staff to break down silos, and in so doing, create a more holistic, integrated and satisfying educational experience for students.

Implications

Research indicates higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of wellbeing in the university student population as opposed to the general population (Bore et al., 2016; Stallman, 2008; 2010). As noted above, regional students experience significant structural challenges, are likely to belong to multiple equity groups and are less likely to have or utilise existing external protective factors. Therefore, it can be argued that students at regional universities are more likely to require embedded support from their institutions.

Research has proposed that there is a need to include skills to develop mental wellbeing and resilience within the university, and that these skills are particularly beneficial when mainstreamed within courses and the curriculum (Bore et al., 2016; Stallman & Hurst, 2011). This is not dissimilar to what has been long recognised in relation to academic skills development via the notion of ‘transition pedagogy’, particularly in relation to equity group students (Devlin & O’Shea, 2012; Kift, 2009; Marr et al., 2013; McKay & Devlin, 2014; 2016).

The results of research on programs that have been undertaken to embed mental wellbeing support suggest that many of the principles for embedded academic support also hold true for this other important area and we have articulated these in the following three principles:

- A whole institution approach is needed to demystify mental wellbeing and emphasise a strengths-based approach, while encouraging and enhancing peer and social support mechanisms.
- Embedded mental wellbeing support is required at all levels (enabling, undergraduate and postgraduate), with flexibility to meet the individual needs of students, and in every course integration of mental wellbeing into the resources, teaching topics and curriculum.
- Team teaching at key points would be useful as part of a sustainable partnership between support staff and discipline experts. Relationships of trust and ‘safe spaces’ that include discipline and support staff are also needed.

Implications for further research

Based on this review of literature and programs within regional Australian university institutions there are three key findings that demand further consideration and research:

1. We know that some students are more likely to experience poor mental wellbeing and we need to consider whether there is scope to introduce specific

support for particular cohorts (Larcombe et al., 2014). We also know that mental wellbeing is positively influenced by factors, such as perceived social support (e.g. Julal, 2016; Sarason & Sarason, 2009) and therefore we need to investigate how utilising a strength-based approach can encourage students to identify and utilise individual factors that enable them to develop positive mental wellbeing.

2. Embedding mental wellbeing materials into the curriculum and providing supportive transitional pedagogical practices has been said to “enhance the motivation, resilience and academic self-efficacy of students that have previously experienced educational disadvantage, and potentially boost their academic achievement and retention outcomes” (Lisciandro et al., 2016, p. 8). However, to date, there has been limited research on the outcomes of embedded approaches. Further empirical research on outcomes would support institutions in adopting such approaches.
3. Finally, institutions need to provide support and skill development to academic staff who are managing a growing number of students who are requesting support for mental wellbeing. While team teaching and supportive partnerships provide one opportunity for this development, it has been shown that it is commonplace for academics to provide mental wellbeing support to students without any real training or professional support. This ‘accidental’ counsellor role not only places a burden on staff but may also negatively impact the student (Margrove, Gustowska & Grove, 2012). Therefore, more research is required on the roles of counsellors and academic staff in enhancing wellbeing as well as the impact of skill development and training (Lisciandro et al., 2016).

Although universities typically have student support services, health services and counsellors, due to limited knowledge of these, or stigma attached to mental health problems, or perhaps even limited self-awareness at a young age, there is limited take up of these services. Thus, we argue that embedding wellbeing into teaching at all levels, students are more likely to be aware of the services and, through normalising mental health issues, be encouraged to seek help at this period of heightened vulnerability (Orygen, 2017). In addition, a ‘team approach’ that breaks down barriers between academics, counselling and professional staff is most likely to be beneficial as supportive pedagogies and materials can be integrated into the mainstream curriculum. However, in order for regional universities to meet the increasing needs of students challenged by mental health issues and achieve this embedded approach, qualitative and quantitative research, such as that discussed here, needs to be used to develop and evaluate programs that embed wellbeing support. We believe that with further research and stronger policy directives for the sector, such as the principles described above, students at regional Australian universities as well as other vulnerable student populations will be better supported.

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