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# AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

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## CASE STUDY EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

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### COMMUNITY INCLUSION KEY TO WELLBEING

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Enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at Edith Cowan University is achieved through a holistic intersectional and whole of institution approach that sees wellbeing as integral to student success within an inclusive professional and educational environment.

Providing a supportive, inclusive, and culturally responsive environment enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to manage their mental health and wellbeing while studying at Edith Cowan University (ECU).

Kurongkurl Katitjin is ECU's Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research, with a mission to "provide excellence in teaching, learning and research in a culturally inclusive environment that values the diversity of Indigenous Australian history and cultural heritage".

Nyungar (Wardandi) man, Professor Braden Hill is the Head of Kurongkurl Katitjin and Pro Vice Chancellor (Equity and Indigenous). He believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students confront many of the same mental health concerns that affect the wider community, but also face added challenges - such as structural and systematic inequality - that can impact on their emotional wellbeing.

"Stress and anxiety are the most common issues that we see," Professor Hill explains, before adding, "lack of inclusive pedagogy or curriculum can cause additional stress and lead to a feeling of marginalism that can exacerbate stress and anxiety."



To address this, ECU involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision-making processes university-wide, and invests in professional development opportunities aimed at increasing the cultural competence of staff so they can make positive contributions to the emotional wellbeing of students and staff.

Director, Student Life at Edith Cowan University, Michelle Rogers, says "institutional racism is discussed often."

"It's something that we're encouraged to think and talk about openly at ECU," says Michelle.

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### CO-CREATING WITH COMMUNITY

Michelle believes that community engagement and involvement in decision-making is a key factor that strengthens ECU's ability to not only serve First Nations students and staff, but the greater community too.

"Apart from meeting the needs of students and staff, we're also here to serve the wider community. Engagement and involvement from the community is important. The advice and support provided by the First Nations community is crucial - we can't operate in isolation," says Michelle.



**“ Institutional racism is discussed often. It’s something that we’re encouraged to think and talk about openly.”**

**MICHELLE ROGERS, DIRECTOR, STUDENT LIFE**

Community representation on the university’s various committees helps to shape thinking and strategy, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation within the university’s peer mentoring program ensures that students can access mentors who have a strong cultural understanding.

Kurongkurl Katitjin’s long-running Elders in Residence Program sees three Elders from the community provide advice and support across the three campuses. Respected Elders like Dr Roma Yibiyung Winmar are available to meet on-campus with staff and students two days a week.

“The Elders in Residence Program is a really important connection to community for the university. They are great at helping to shape the work and research we do. They’re involved in conversations about strategy, policy, learning and teaching,” says Professor Hill.

**“ Lack of inclusive pedagogy or curriculum can cause additional stress and lead to a feeling of marginalism.”**

**PROFESSOR BRADEN HILL, PRO VICE CHANCELLOR (EQUITY AND INDIGENOUS)**

### CHAMPIONING DIVERSE REPRESENTATION

Whether it’s a poster raising awareness for a mental health day, or a broader health promotion campaign being run by the university, the language and images used within messaging are reviewed and adapted by First Nations staff members to ensure it is inclusive and culturally appropriate.

“We make sure that there is representation and visibility of First Nations people so that students feel like it’s a message for them. We often take the institutional message and tailor it to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohort,” says Professor Hill.

Professor Hill notes that universities would benefit from recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture isn’t helpful.

“Universities often make the mistake of thinking that First Nations students are culturally distinct and homogenously the same – that they all have a similar relationship to their cultural identity. This can have a considerable impact on their mental health and wellbeing,” says Professor Hill.

With this in mind, Professor Hill says employing First Nations staff who have firsthand experience and understanding of the complex issues impacting on the mental health and wellbeing of students is paramount.

“We find the trickier mental health conversations are for those students who are trying to negotiate their identities with peers and staff, while navigating the demands of university. It’s highly complex work that often only First Nations support workers could understand,” says Professor Hill.

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**PROFESSOR BRADEN HILL, PRO VICE CHANCELLOR (EQUITY AND INDIGENOUS)**

### SETTING STUDENTS UP FOR SUCCESS

ECU also employs four full-time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Success officers who have experienced the same higher education journey that the students are on.

“When students feel overwhelmed or stressed, having First Nations Student Success officers is really advantageous,” says Professor Hill.

In an effort to boost student retention rates, the Aboriginal University Readiness Assessment provides the Student Success team with a holistic overview of the student’s life before they begin studies. Covering everything from the student’s academic capabilities, to their ability to manage stress and how supportive their family is, the overview enables Student Success staff to provide students with appropriate support throughout their academic journey.



When data revealed that family commitments often create conflict and stress for First Nations students, the Student Success team began hosting a family day at the start of the semester. An opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to invite their family to see ECU's Mount Lawley campus, family day aims to make the university journey a collaborative experience for students and their families.

"We want to not only invite students on the higher education journey, but we want to bring families along as well," says Professor Hill.

"Family can be incredibly enabling, but paradoxically family can also be a bit of an obstacle for students to engage in university fully. Many of the obstacles First Nations students face are off campus. If students feel pressure from the people they care about the most, it's very easy to walk away from university."

**"When students feel overwhelmed or stressed, having First Nations Student Success officers is really advantageous."**

**PROFESSOR BRADEN HILL, PRO VICE CHANCELLOR (EQUITY AND INDIGENOUS)**

## DATA-DRIVEN RESPONSES

Apart from listening to feedback derived from community consultation, ECU implements initiatives and programs based on service data, student surveys and emerging research on First Nations student engagement in higher education.

Service data indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are less likely to use counselling and disability and equity services – highlighting the importance of having First Nations people working as Student Success officers.

"Data-driven responses are informing the work we are doing. The Student Success officers conduct outreach phone calls every three weeks, then codify the types of concerns students are raising," says Professor Hill, noting that mental health and wellbeing is a key measure.

Even though using data to inform strategies is critical, Braden believes that developing relationships with students is key to fostering improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes, as First Nations students are more likely to seek support and help from people they know and trust.

"When support staff have strong, trusting relationships with students, it makes mental health conversations much easier," says Professor Hill.

## FIND OUT MORE

[Kurongkurl Katitjin, Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research.](#)

[University Mental Health Framework.](#)

## LINKS TO THE FRAMEWORK

Edith Cowan University's holistic approach to enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students allows the university to co-design and tailor initiatives that address their specific needs.



This aligns with **principle one** of the [University Mental Health Framework.](#)

Programs and initiatives to support students' mental health and wellbeing typically involve a range of different practices. This case study also draws on other practices described in the framework by:

- ensuring diverse student cultures and identities are valued and visible across the university;
- providing services and supports that respond to complexities among ECU's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who may be at increased risk of mental ill-health; and
- taking approaches to student mental health and wellbeing that are informed by a range of accessible data sources.

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[ORYGEN.ORG.AU](http://ORYGEN.ORG.AU)

35 POPLAR ROAD  
PARKVILLE VIC 3052  
AUSTRALIA

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