

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

CASE STUDY RMIT UNIVERSITY

BUILDING A ROADMAP TO CHANGE

RMIT University's whole of university approach recognises mental health and wellbeing as a core institution-wide priority. This approach acknowledges the university community's role - from council and academic board, to staff, service providers, students and alumni - in creating learning and work environments that enhance student mental health and wellbeing.

"At RMIT we're passionate about providing transformative experiences and shaping the world for the better," explains RMIT Vice-Chancellor and President, Martin Bean.

"This means we need to care for our students and staff in ways that go deeper than reaching graduation or having the right skills for the job. We also recognise that mental health and wellbeing is both the challenge and opportunity of our time, and we want to make a positive contribution. It is fundamental to working and learning, so taking a whole of university approach makes sense."

In 2017, RMIT's academic board made a public commitment to prioritising student mental health and wellbeing by endorsing the *Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities*.



Following endorsement of the framework, a cross-university Mental Wellbeing Advisory Group was formed to oversee a change project that recognised the mental health and wellbeing of students as a core institution-wide priority.

As the Director of Student Wellbeing and Inclusion at the time, Fiona Ellis sees the positive outcomes that occur when mental health and wellbeing is championed by leaders.

"Having the backing of the academic board allowed us to commence a truly whole of university approach and to create change at all levels," explains Fiona.

Since this time, RMIT's strategic approach has grown to focus on the mental health and psychosocial safety of students and staff alike.

"Mental health and wellbeing is both the challenge and opportunity of our time, and we want to make a positive contribution."

MARTIN BEAN, VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT



REDUCING STIGMA

With fear and shame stopping many students from accessing mental health support, RMIT is focussed on creating a positive, supportive culture that empowers students and staff to feel comfortable seeking help and having conversations about mental health.

Workshops and engagement surveys have revealed that students desire authentic, genuine conversations about the pressure to conceal mental health concerns and the sense of isolation that can stem from feeling different to others.

After listening to this feedback, the RMIT Wellbeing team co-designed the 2018 **'It's OK to not be OK'** stigma reduction campaign in collaboration with the RMIT Student Union. The initiative was primarily aimed at students, with staff being a secondary audience.

Hosted on a central, online platform, the campaign provided insights into students' lived experience and invited students to write messages of support and solidarity to others who might be struggling, says Mental Wellbeing Initiatives Program Lead, Vanna Garrick.

"The campaign was so powerful because we utilised the strength and knowledge base of our own community. It provided a way for students to show support for one another," says Vanna.

Acknowledging the importance of providing clear pathways for students to seek mental health assistance, the website displayed prominent links and information on how to access counselling and urgent support.

The campaign also featured a [video of RMIT alumnus Nick Bracks](#), who shared his personal story of studying while experiencing depression and anxiety.

Nick says in the video: "talking about our mental health is the most important thing that we can do."

"If you talk about it, you realise that it's not this big, ugly thing that you should be ashamed of ... you should go and talk to someone, take the lead. If we all do that, we can make enormous change in this area."

"The campaign was so powerful because we utilised the strength and knowledge base of our own community."

VANNA GARRICK, MENTAL WELLBEING INITIATIVES PROGRAM LEAD



Vanna notes that Nick's story demonstrates that good outcomes are possible while studying with a mental health condition: "his message was honest and hopeful, which helps to destigmatise mental health issues."

Evaluation of digital data showed the online campaign received high-levels of engagement, reaching more than 300,000 people on social media and attracting more than 5,000 social media engagements. The campaign website also received high-levels of traffic, with more than 250 messages of support left by students, while the Nick Bracks video was viewed over 10,000 times on Facebook.

"If you talk about [mental health], you realise that it's not this big, ugly thing that you should be ashamed of."

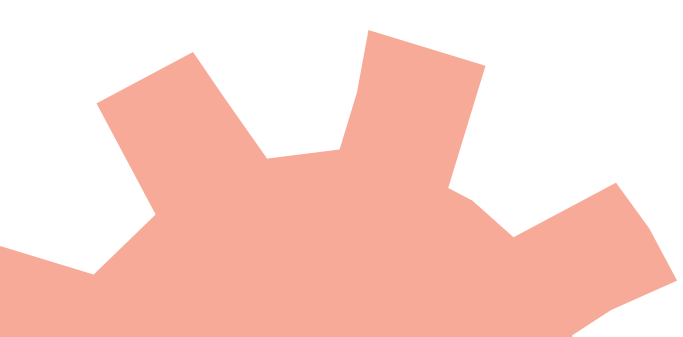
NICK BRACKS, RMIT ALUMNUS

UPSKILLING STAFF

Collaborative work with teaching, academic and professional staff revealed that there was more the university could do to clarify the role staff play when assisting students in distress.

"Our staff are often the first point of call for a student who is in distress. We recognise that staff aren't counsellors or mental health professionals, so we needed to equip them to take action within their role," says Vanna.

Mental health and wellbeing workshops, webinars and online courses have helped staff from across the university to build the capability and confidence needed to identify and assist students and colleagues experiencing distress, and know when and where to refer them for further support.



A dedicated phone line, developed in collaboration with clinical expertise and operated by trained RMIT Support Service staff, was established to enable staff to seek immediate support for students they are concerned about.

“If a student’s wellbeing or welfare is at risk, and we can support them quickly with coordinated early intervention, their study and health outcomes are improved,” says Vanna, who adds that the service helps reduce the emotional burden on staff.

In 2020 RMIT launched a new health, safety and wellbeing strategy, which includes a five-year mental wellbeing action plan and evaluation framework.

Director of Health, Safety and Wellbeing, Emma Blee says the strategy recognises the growing importance of psychosocial safety in work and learning environments.

“We are committed to building a culture of care at RMIT,” says Emma.

“Our human-centred approach sends a message that every single person in our community is valuable and has a role to play.”

“ Staff aren’t counsellors or mental health professionals, so we needed to equip them to take action.”

VANNA GARRICK, MENTAL WELLBEING INITIATIVES PROGRAM LEAD

FIND OUT MORE

[RMIT mental health and wellbeing values.](#)

[RMIT It’s OK to not be OK campaign.](#)

[University Mental Health Framework.](#)

LINKS TO THE FRAMEWORK

RMIT University’s whole of university approach is an example of the effective coordination of mental health strategies across the institution, acknowledging the key role all members of the university community play in supporting student mental health and wellbeing.



This aligns with **principle two** 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:

- co-designing mental health and wellbeing initiatives with students, ensuring information is actively sought about their needs and perspectives;
- building understanding and increasing awareness about mental health through communication to help break down stigma and discrimination; and
- supporting staff in student-facing roles to know what to do (within the scope of their role) to assist students with mental health and wellbeing-related issues.

**REVOLUTION
IN MIND** *ory
gen*

GET IN TOUCH

IF YOU’D LIKE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ORYGEN, PLEASE CALL +61 3 9966 9100 OR SEND AN EMAIL TO INFO@ORYGEN.ORG.AU

ORYGEN.ORG.AU

35 POPLAR ROAD
PARKVILLE VIC 3052
AUSTRALIA

FOLLOW US ON

