



AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

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PLEASE NOTE This framework draft has been made available for further consultation. This is a draft document and may not reflect the final framework layout, structure and content.

The draft framework is subject to further refinement, layout and formatting to ensure it is fit for purpose.

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INTRODUCTION

Good mental health is a personal and community asset that needs to be promoted and protected. It is linked to positive study and work outcomes, greater productivity, lower rates of mental disorders, better physical health and increased life expectancy.(1) By contrast, mental ill-health causes distress, can impact on learning and employment, and contribute to psychosocial disability and reduced life expectancy in the absence of appropriate supports.(2)

Universities play a key role in shaping and supporting individuals' health and wellbeing. In addition, students experience of mental health and wellbeing while they are studying at university can have a significant role in their educational success.

The Australian University Mental Health Framework (the framework) aims to create learning environments that have the potential to improve overall quality of life for all within the university community. The framework utilises a healthy settings approach to enable positive health promotion, prevention of illness and to reduce risk across the community. The goal of creating healthy settings, requires a holistic approach emphasising collaboration, coordination, community participation, engagement, empowerment and equity as both philosophy and practice.

Individually, universities have been working to address student mental health and wellbeing. They recognise the role it plays in students' academic success, and the importance of positive mental health and wellbeing as a foundation to support participation in life beyond university. Case studies will accompany the framework to highlight examples of the good practice universities are already leading and implementing to support student mental health and wellbeing.

Promoting good mental health and wellbeing and supporting students affected by mental ill-health are shared responsibilities across the education and health sectors. The principles and areas for action in the framework have been developed in consultation with universities, health providers, mental health organisations and students. The aim is to create mentally healthy university settings that provide the best opportunities for students to thrive educationally and personally.

The framework is an opportunity for universities, health providers and mental health organisations to recognise, review and strengthen their approaches to:

- promote mental health and wellbeing and prevent mental ill-health for university students;
- provide effective support for those experiencing mental ill-health to enable them to actively participate in education and society; and
- create healthy settings at universities conducive to providing protective factors for students' mental health and wellbeing.

A complex, multifaceted challenge such as mental health and wellbeing, requires collaborative, multi-sector and multi-component approaches. It requires strong leadership and a long term commitment to change. Accelerating advances to improve university student mental health and wellbeing requires working together, and across sectors, sharing expertise and experience, consolidating understanding and practice, and driving continuous improvement.



VISION

The university and mental health sectors working in partnership to embed mental health and wellbeing as a key priority area within the educational journey and experience of university students to enhance student success, wellbeing and contributions to healthy communities.



PRINCIPLES

Six guiding principles underpin the framework.

Students are at the centre of the framework and actions are informed by students' needs, perspectives and the reality of their experiences.

Meaningfully engaging with students and co-creating responses to mental health and wellbeing is essential. This ensures decisions are made with a full understanding of students' contexts and their direct experiences. Engaging students from a diverse, cross-section of the university community – including those with a lived experience of mental ill-health – will improve the relevance of future university mental health and wellbeing strategies and activities, and therefore increase the likelihood of beneficial outcomes.

Universities know their own student populations and are well-placed to facilitate diverse participation in mental health and wellbeing initiatives that is reflective of the institution's student population and provides a voice for students at increased risk of mental ill-health ([see page 11](#)).

Supporting good mental health and wellbeing is part of, and facilitates, the core business of universities.

A mentally healthy university community encourages participation; fosters a diverse, inclusive environment; promotes connectedness; and supports academic and personal achievement. Universities are education settings; they are in the business of building human capacity. Good mental health and wellbeing enables students to perform at their best – physically, emotionally and mentally.

The messages people receive in familiar settings, such as universities, are among the most influential in shaping mental health and wellbeing behaviours.⁽³⁾ A settings-based approach to improved mental health and wellbeing considers interactions between student and staff wellbeing. Supporting good mental health and wellbeing may benefit individual students and staff, and organisationally, the university, through increased academic outcomes for students and increased employee engagement and improved productivity for staff.



A whole of university approach recognises the role all members of the university community play in impacting students' mental health and wellbeing.

Embedding student mental health and wellbeing within the university requires a whole of university approach which looks beyond enhancing student services, towards creating an environment, community and culture supportive of good mental health. It is important to consider how systems, structures, processes, policies, relationships and resourcing can positively influence student and staff mental health and wellbeing, and contribute to a mentally healthy university experience.

Significant expertise exists within universities – including academics, researchers, teaching faculties (mental health-related disciplines), and mental health and peer workforces – to help guide a whole of university response.

Leaders set the tone in building a community and culture supportive of good mental health and student success. They promote protective factors and minimise harm.

University leaders at all levels share responsibility for influencing the climate and relationships within the learning community, leading organisational planning, resource allocation and evaluation focused on mental health and wellbeing and supporting ongoing learning and reform.

Leaders have an important role in prioritising mental health and wellbeing and ensuring that it is embedded within the core business of the university. Strong and strategic leadership is critical to the development and maintenance of supportive physical, social and academic environments that promote student and staff mental health and wellbeing.

Coordinated action: collaboration within and beyond the university.

A collaborative, coordinated approach to action within the university, across the sector, and with external mental health and wellbeing partners will be most effective in avoiding duplication, and ensuring that students can access appropriate mental health and wellbeing support and care as needed. Collaboration improves the breadth and accessibility of available services, stimulates innovation and growth, and improves efficiency.

Continuous improvement and innovation: systematic data collection and a commitment to evaluation.

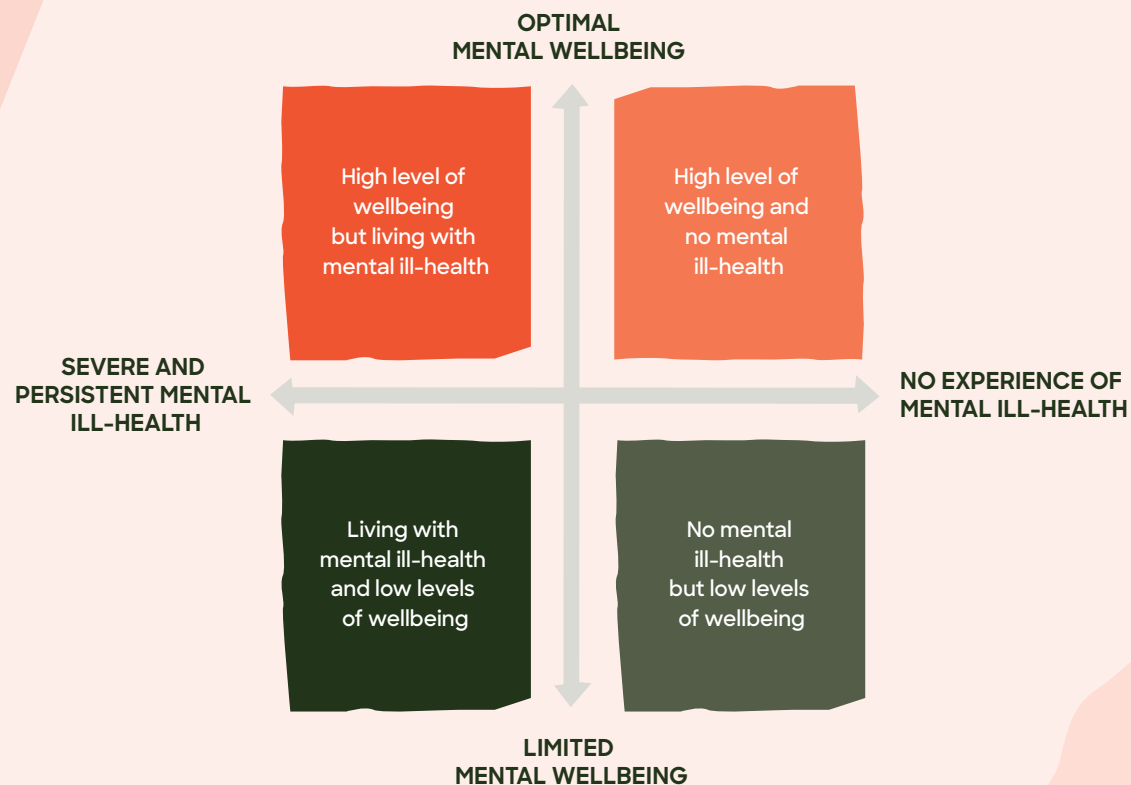
A clear picture of the current situation and experiences of students is needed for universities to identify the effectiveness of their existing activities and propose appropriate targets and action.

Implementation of the framework will require an evaluation of component initiatives and activities, as well as the coordinated, whole of university response. An evaluation plan, incorporating both process and outcome indicators and a strategy for dissemination and sharing of results with key stakeholders, is required.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The phrase ‘mental health and wellbeing’ is used throughout the framework to encompass the continuum of mental health states, and to ensure applicability to a wider audience. Mental health includes both the presence and absence of mental ill-health, though many people more strongly associate it with the presence of mental illness. Mental wellbeing is generally thought of as positive mental health. Due to the interrelated nature of wellbeing, mental health and mental ill-health, as well as the range of factors that influence these states, the framework applies the dual continua model of mental health (adapted in figure 1).

Figure 1: Dual Continua Model of Mental Health (adapted)(4)



FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

The framework has been developed through extensive consultation with educational and mental health stakeholders and students. The framework supports universities and the mental health sector to review, evolve and strengthen their work in order to meet the growing and changing needs of the student population.

The framework is informed by a socio-ecological model which recognises the interaction of individual, interpersonal, institutional, community and structural factors influencing mental health and wellbeing.(5, 6)

The framework identifies opportunities across these factors where universities and the mental health sector can promote positive influences – and mitigate negative influences – to support student mental health and wellbeing.

Guidance is provided for:

- universities to create learning environments conducive to good mental health and wellbeing. Included across all areas of the university, reflecting the opportunity for a range of factors within the university setting to contribute to the mental health and wellbeing of students and the university community; and
- the **mental health sector** to support increased engagement with the university community and to deliver services that meet the needs of the student population.

The framework is based on available evidence and advice, with the expectation that it will evolve through a continuous improvement approach informed by trialling, reflecting, learning and adapting.

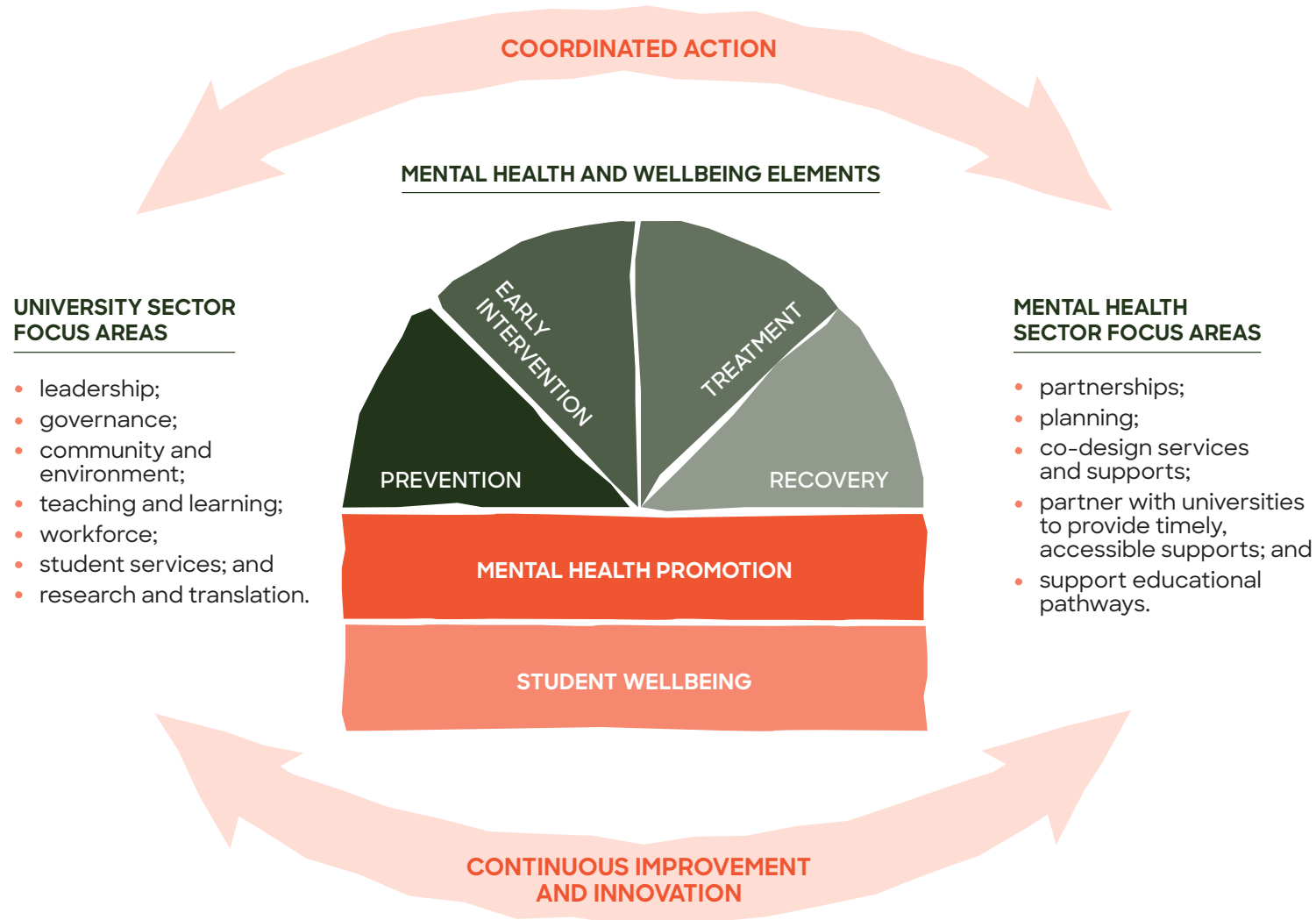
The limited research and data specific to the needs of university students or effective strategies to support their mental health and wellbeing is an opportunity to drive further action, research and evaluation. As the evidence base develops, there is a need to enable reflection, revision and growth of the framework to inform operational delivery in the years to come.



THE FRAMEWORK

The framework is oriented around student wellbeing, mental health promotion and the spectrum of mental health interventions, including prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery (figure 2). It identifies the importance of coordinated action across and within the university and with community settings and encourages a focus on continuous improvement and innovation.

Figure 2: Model for university mental health framework



The components of the framework help to unpack the complex, multifaceted challenge of mental health and wellbeing for university students and identify key areas in which action is needed to strengthen and facilitate a more comprehensive, collaborative response to meet student's needs.

Coordinated action across and within sectors and continuous improvement and innovation are included as enablers. Incorporating these components as a core aspect of the approach recognises the diverse and transient nature of the university student population, the need for action across multiple sectors, organisations and individuals, and acknowledges the need for increased research and evidence related to university students' mental health and wellbeing.

Focus areas for universities are included which emphasise the importance of a settings-based approach, recognising the role of organisational, physical and cultural environments in supporting good mental health and wellbeing.

Focus areas for the mental health sector are included to bring attention to the need for planning and coordination of activities to support university students' mental health and wellbeing, particularly those at increased risk for mental ill-health.

At the centre of the framework, is a simplified adaptation of the mental health intervention spectrum, included to support comprehensive planning for interventions that address the continuum of mental ill-health. These areas of focus are aligned with the recovery-oriented model used by the Australian Government Department of Health.(7, 8) In addition, mental health promotion and student wellbeing are included to emphasise the importance of action in these areas for all students, whether or not they are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, mental ill-health.

Further description of each of the components of the framework is included below with some starting points for action identified.



THE MENTAL HEALTH OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

A diverse mix of 1.5 million students attend universities in Australia. (9) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, international students, students with a disability, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and regional and remote students are all attending universities in greater numbers compared with ten years ago. (9) Students have greater flexibility over how they study, with part time and off-campus options making it possible to study around work and family responsibilities. (9) Sixty per cent of students are younger than 25 years old, and 58 per cent of students identify as female.

University students are recognised as being at increased risk of experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing resulting in negative impacts on their ability to engage effectively with their education. (10-12) In the general population the prevalence rates for mental ill-health are 20 per cent or one in five every year. (13) Among young people in the general population, 75 per cent of mental illness emerges before the age of 25. (14) The onset of mental ill-health peaks during adolescence and early

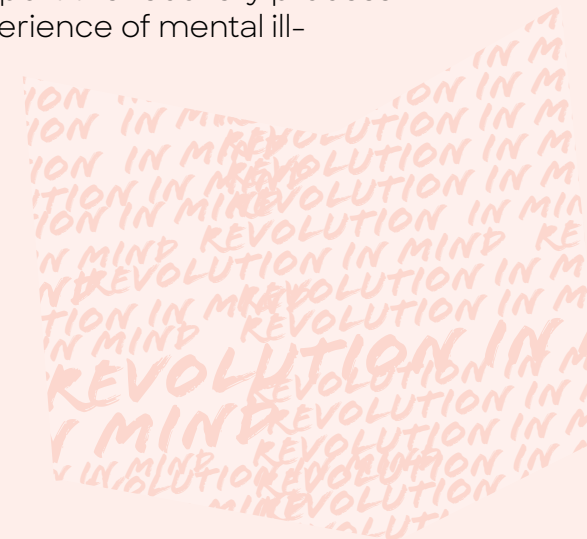
adulthood (15) – the time many young people transition to university.

The available evidence indicates that university students report high to very high levels of distress, (16) experience high rates of depression and anxiety (11) and are more likely than the general population to be diagnosed with a mental illness. (17) The university experience itself often exposes students to a range of risk factors that may negatively influence mental health and wellbeing, for example financial stress, (17, 18) lack of sleep, (19-21) poor nutrition, (22) balancing work and study responsibilities, (23) increased autonomy and responsibility, (24) and pressure to excel in a competitive job environment. (11, 25) Students also report significant barriers to help-seeking, including stigma, (26, 27) concerns regarding academic and career outcomes, (28) and uncertainty related to confidentiality. (29)

Some student cohorts have been identified as being at increased risk of mental ill-health including international students, (30) rural/regional students, (31) law and medicine students, (32-36) students from low socio-economic backgrounds, (18) PhD students, (37) and students with

physical disabilities who may also be at greater risk of mental health problems. (13) Other student groups may also benefit from differentiated strategies to support mental health and wellbeing including students who are the first in their family to attend university, (38) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, (35, 39) students who identify as LGBTQI+, (40) and students with existing mental health conditions. (41, 42)

Academic performance and course completion rates are impacted negatively for students who experience mental ill-health and these students are more likely to consider leaving, or, leave their course early. (12) Alternately, successful participation in tertiary education can act as a protective factor for mental health and can support the recovery process from an experience of mental ill-health. (43)



MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING ELEMENTS

The elements at the centre of the framework provide a guide to support comprehensive planning for both preventive and responsive actions to address mental health and wellbeing. The model presents an idealised view, when in reality, the boundaries between each area are likely to be blurred.

Universities and the mental health sector have different roles to play across all mental health and wellbeing elements. Broadly speaking, universities typically focus on student wellbeing, mental health promotion and prevention of mental ill-health, while mental health care providers focus on healthcare delivered through early intervention, treatment and recovery interventions. Other mental health sector organisations and providers may offer support or services across all mental health and wellbeing elements.

Universities are encouraged to take a setting-specific approach to meet the needs of their student population, working in partnership with mental health sector providers and organisations to access relevant expertise, facilitate pathways to care and support institution-specific strategies.



STUDENT WELLBEING

Supporting students' educational achievement is the core business of universities.

Incorporating a focus on student wellbeing aligns with universities' aims to enable students to flourish. Wellbeing refers to a positive state of mental health and is associated with personal growth, intrinsic motivation, positive relationships, autonomy and competence.(44) Wellbeing is more than the absence of mental ill-health. Positive wellbeing enables students to perform at their best - physically, emotionally and mentally.

Suggested Actions

- Amplify initiatives that develop and build protective factors for strengthening wellbeing associated with improved academic achievement, including a sense of belonging, positive relationships, a sense of autonomy and feelings of competence.(44)
- Take a holistic approach to support students to remain engaged with their education by coordinating policies, processes and supports that address university-specific risk factors known to influence wellbeing (described on [page 11](#)).
- Connect students to programs that build holistic wellbeing - physical, social, mental, spiritual - making the link between the activity and wellbeing.
- Engage student clubs and associations to recognise the potential of their programming to offer holistic support for students and increase community connections.
- Design engaging curricula and learning experiences (see Enhancing Student Wellbeing, [Engaging Curricula Action](#) area) that enhance wellbeing.
- Align strategies for factors contributing to student wellbeing such as safety, inclusion, access to timely support services, student voice and agency.
- Acknowledge health and wellbeing as a teaching and learning issue incorporating holistic, student-centred, course-specific support for students with appropriate professional learning for teaching staff, including clear boundaries and lines of referral.(45)
- Demonstrate students are valued and supported as members of the university community through an inclusive environment that embraces diversity and flexibility, puts the student first and enables students to fully participate in their learning, free from abuse, harassment or unfair criticism.(46, 47)

MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

Universities deliver strategies and actions to promote, maintain and improve mental health and wellbeing.

Promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing is a critical aspect of a settings-based approach.(48) There is evidence that mental health promotion and awareness raising are effective at changing attitudes and reducing stigma in university settings.(49, 50)

Mental health is important to everyone. Increasing awareness of mental health encourages improved understanding and better conversations and empowers individuals to take action in support of their own and others mental health. Having the knowledge, skills and understanding to recognise, manage, prevent and reduce the impact of mental ill-health can encourage help-seeking and reduce stigma.

Suggested Actions

- Increase awareness, knowledge and understanding of mental health and empower individuals to take action in support of their own and others mental health, and to reduce stigma and discrimination.
- Integrate awareness of mental health with other health promotion activities, emphasising a holistic approach with consideration for the interrelated nature of physical, social, mental and spiritual health and the interaction of community, context and environment.
- Improve the mental health literacy of all members of the university community to break down stigma and increase understanding and support for those experiencing mental ill-health.
- Create and promote inclusive environments that empower students to value and prioritise health and wellbeing, in the short term and beyond into their adult lives.
- Build and maintain a mentally healthy workplace and ensure staff and student mental health strategies are aligned.
- Create visibly safe service environments that reflect the diversity of the university community promote their availability via channels and strategies that effectively reach the intended audience.
- Incorporate strategies for individuals to safely share their lived experiences to make mental health promotion more relatable and engaging.
- Tailor programs for raising awareness and discussing mental health to consider diverse cultural perceptions, representations and worldviews.

PREVENTION

A focus on prevention facilitates mental health and wellbeing for all university members creating long term improvements for the whole university community. Actions are designed to support good mental health and wellbeing and prevent the onset of mental ill-health.

Greater investment in initiatives to prevent mental ill-health could ameliorate a significant proportion of mental ill-health issues.(51) Focusing on prevention also includes addressing the systemic factors in university settings that contribute to mental distress and empowering individuals to address contributing lifestyle factors within a supportive environment. A consistent, preventative approach across the setting supports all members of the university community, including those with mental health issues, to participate meaningfully in university life without discrimination, stigma or exclusion.

Suggested Actions

- Recognise and address modifiable risk factors, specific to university students that contribute to poor mental health and wellbeing, and physical and psychological safety.
- Identify and adapt structural and systemic factors in the university setting that contribute to mental distress.
- Co-design inclusive communities and environments with students.
- Support students to acquire social and emotional skills that contribute to resilience and wellbeing.
- Increase students' mental health literacy to support students to understand, recognise, manage, prevent and reduce the impact of mental ill-health.
- Strategically target interventions to meet the specific needs of students at increased risk of mental ill-health described on [page 11](#) and including young people (up to 25 years).(52)

EVOLUTION
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EARLY INTERVENTION

Universities take a setting-specific approach to early intervention, drawing on a range of university community members to identify and refer students in need of support. Non-university providers and organisations may provide relevant expertise to support institution-specific strategies.

Early intervention incorporates actions to prevent the severity and impact of mental ill-health for people experiencing early signs and symptoms of mental ill-health. It is a cost-effective approach to improving student mental health. Evidence indicates that effective early interventions for young people may reduce the economic burden of mental ill-health over the lifespan, particularly for psychotic disorders.(53) Students who are experiencing mild to moderate mental ill-health benefit most from initiatives that reduce the severity and impact of mental ill-health and help them to remain engaged in their education, while reducing any additional distress.

Suggested Actions

- Recognise and respond to issues of stigma and discrimination within the university to facilitate early help-seeking behaviours.
- Co-design strategies with students to develop cultural and contextual approaches to increase early help-seeking behaviours.
- Provide mental health literacy training for all staff in student-facing roles and for students with key leadership roles within student organisations and groups to facilitate early detection and referral.
- Train specialist peer workers to provide additional support through mentoring and peer delivered programs.
- Engage with professional organisations to create inclusive policies and practices that facilitate early help-seeking without fear of future professional penalty.
- Review and strengthen counselling service screening tools to better identify young people at high risk of developing mental ill-health.
- Develop a stepped care approach that offers a hierarchy of interventions to support individuals as their needs change, with input from students, multidisciplinary services staff and community mental health providers. Interventions offered could include digital or online interventions, peer-delivered interventions, coaching/educational sessions, individual therapy, group therapy, case management, referral to non-university providers.
- Communicate to all staff and students the variety and purpose of support services available to them at their university and within the community to encourage them to access the right support at the right time or to refer those in need.



TREATMENT

Universities and non-university providers and organisations work in partnership to provide students with access to appropriate treatments and manage pathways between university and non-university services. Includes actions that facilitate access to effective, evidence-based services and supports for individuals with a diagnosed (or diagnosable) mental health issue.

Students who are experiencing mild to moderate mental ill-health benefit most from initiatives that reduce the severity and impact of mental ill-health and help them to remain engaged in their education, while reducing any additional distress.

Suggested Actions

- Offer a continuum of supports and services for students with identified mental health issues within a stepped care model informed by students' needs and experiences, and in collaboration with health providers and mental health organisations.
- Co-design appropriate, accessible, inclusive supports and services with students, including those with a lived experience of mental ill-health.
- Establish active cross-sector partnerships to build awareness and provide education about the range of treatments available and the positive outcomes of effective treatment.
- Implement integrated services hubs, or directly facilitate clear and straightforward pathways between services, to address a range of interrelated student needs, both personal and education-related.
- Facilitate access to a multidisciplinary workforce to cater to the diversity of the student population and connect students with the right care at the right time.
- Universities, overseas student health insurers, health providers and community mental health services to explore partnerships to improve access to appropriate services for international students.

RECOVERY

Actions that promote recovery and mitigate against the exacerbation of symptoms or relapse of mental ill-health. Universities work in partnership with non-university providers and organisations to manage pathways between university and non-university services and to support students to maintain or re-engage with their learning.

People with lived experience of mental health are experts by experience. Research with students shows that they conceptualise their mental health, and the role of the university, in a variety of different ways. Students' expectations of their university, in regard to their mental health, is also varied.(54)

Suggested Actions

- Facilitate appropriate transitions back into education for students who have had a leave of absence due to mental health related conditions.
- Understand the benefits of educational participation on the journey to recovery from mental ill-health.
- Align academic and administrative processes to support students to remain engaged with learning.
- Facilitate collaboration between teaching and learning staff and student services to provide tailored support for students returning to study following a period of mental ill-health.
- Establish partnerships or agreements between university and non-university service providers, to enable sharing of information (where appropriate and in accordance to privacy requirements) where a student experiencing a mental health condition (particularly one which is significantly impacting on functioning) may need additional considerations and support to remain engaged in, or re-enter university education.
- Investigate opportunities to co-locate some services or create in-reach services agreements.
- Ensure university teaching, administration and management staff are provided with information and resources should they need to understand the impact of more complex and severe mental health conditions on educational participation and performance and enable staff to provide an appropriate response (specific to their role in supporting educational attainment).

THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

As education institutions and leaders in the community, universities play an important role in shaping the health of those within their community. The university is an environment that includes communities of the workplace, teaching and learning, research, and residential campuses. The framework views mental health and wellbeing through a student lens, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the university community.

A healthy settings or whole of university approach, embeds a response to student mental health and wellbeing within their core business and recognises:

- the role all members of the university community play in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing, and emphasises effective collaboration across the whole university community, and with health providers and mental health organisations.
- the benefits of a whole of organisation university approach to improving mental health and wellbeing through integrating a range of promotion and prevention initiatives, stigma reduction and education activities, and by supporting those experiencing or recovering from mental ill-health to engage with work or education.(55, 56)

Key features of mentally healthy university settings include:

- an emphasis on community participation, partnership, empowerment and equity.(57)
- leadership buy-in: placing mental health and wellbeing high on the agenda of decision makers, in every facet of operations, sends a strong message to all in the university community about the value and importance of mental health and wellbeing for all.
- meaningful engagement with students: co-creating responses with students ensures decisions are made with a full understanding of their context and their direct experiences. Engaging students from a diverse cross-section of the university community - including those with a lived experience of mental ill-health - improves the relevance, uptake and outcomes of university mental health and wellbeing strategies and activities.

Settings-based approaches have been validated through internal and external evaluation and experience.(57)

Evidence from other settings-based approaches reinforces that change is likely to be most effective when multiple factors are targeted simultaneously through aligned programs and initiatives.(58) In university settings, this includes strategies for creating supportive physical, social and academic environments that promote student and staff mental wellbeing.

FOCUS AREAS FOR THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR

The framework identifies seven focus areas for the university sector which contribute to a whole of university response to improve students' mental health and wellbeing. The focus areas provide a lens through which to view the elements described in the centre of the framework. Actions across all elements should be planned for each focus area to develop a comprehensive, coordinated strategy to support student mental health and wellbeing.

LEADERSHIP: refers to leadership at multiple levels within the university.

University leaders set the tone and influence the whole of institution commitment to creating and maintaining learning environments that:

- are conducive to good mental health and wellbeing;
- prevent mental health issues; and
- strengthen the integration between universities and community mental health services.

A settings-based approach that addresses the complex nature of mental health and wellbeing, requires a shift from program-based initiatives to the implementation of multi-level and multi-modal initiatives, prioritised and driven by strong leadership, and co-created with and developed for specific users throughout the organisation.

Multiple initiatives and studies have emphasised the importance of leadership in committing to improve students' mental health.(12, 55, 59) Workplace mental health initiatives, such as **Heads Up**, provide support and recommendations, identifying opportunities for leaders to positively influence mental health and wellbeing through workplace culture, management practices and employee experiences.

GOVERNANCE: relates to the ways in which universities operate, including the systems, policies, relationships, and processes that organise and control each institution.

Adequately addressing student mental health and wellbeing requires a coordinated, integrated approach that addresses organisational, physical and cultural environments, considers organisational risks and connects to broader initiatives. An evolving, institution-wide mental health and wellbeing strategy, aligned with the broader university strategic plan, will help to embed mental health as a key priority in institutional decision making.

Alignment between policies that support the mental health and wellbeing of students with policies which support the academic and teaching functions of the university will increase consistency, provide greater clarity for those implementing the policies and support both students and staff.

Processes and policies that enable students to access support while reducing additional distress can help students remain engaged with their education.

UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT: includes the physical, social and cultural aspects that contribute to the university community and the environment in which students learn.

An inclusive community supports all members of the university community, including those with mental ill-health, to participate meaningfully in university life without discrimination, stigma or exclusion. Healthy connections through relationships, places, and social activities are known as protective factors for mental health.

Identifying and amplifying connections for students with their university and others within the community not only benefits mental health and wellbeing but also aligns with universities ongoing efforts to engage alumni effectively.

A key factor in students feeling valued and supported as members of a university community is an institutional culture that embraces diversity, flexibility and puts the student's needs first.(46)

Evidence from settings based interventions shows that creating supportive physical, social and academic environments can promote student and staff mental wellbeing in universities.(60)

TEACHING AND LEARNING: focuses on actions that contribute directly to the conditions of learning and teaching.

Incorporating mental health and wellbeing within teaching and learning programs acknowledges the importance of meeting students at their point of need and the role of universities in equipping students with lifelong, transferable skills. A review of settings based interventions to promote mental health in universities found that the most promising interventions to improve student mental health and wellbeing included those that changed the way students were taught and assessed.(60)

Student mental health is supported when learning opportunities offer choice and flexibility, foster intrinsic motivation and emphasise the value of the skills being learned.(61) Learning environments that actively foster autonomous motivation, a sense of belonging, positive relationships, experiences of autonomy and feelings of competence strengthen student mental wellbeing and academic achievement.(61) Within education, there is evidence of the importance of mutual relationships and empowerment in enabling innovative thinking and reducing alienation with ‘the establishment’.(62)

Five areas of student need have been identified for enhancing student success at university including purpose, capability, connectedness, resourcefulness and a sense of academic culture.(63) It is important for students to receive support where they feel they might be struggling in any of these areas.

WORKFORCE: incorporates the needs of the entire university workforce, with particular consideration for different requirements of staff, dependent on their role.

Aligning student and staff mental health and wellbeing initiatives recognises the importance of mental health and wellbeing for all. Evidence suggests that creating a mentally healthy workplace, and building and maintaining a mentally healthy workforce maximises wellbeing and can increase productivity.(64) Safe Work Australia’s **Principles of Good Work Design** can assist in creating more efficient, healthy and safe workplaces. Mentally healthy workplaces get the best out of everyone, are more likely to attract and keep top employees and provide better outcomes for the organisation’s bottom line.

Students in regular contact with academic staff often build trust and rapport and seek assistance for non-academic issues because of this existing relationship. Delivering appropriate training to all staff likely to come into contact with students who may disclose mental health issues supports them to know what to do and facilitate access to timely support.

Building relationships and referral pathways between academic and counselling staff supports two-way transference of knowledge and understanding and clear boundaries and lines of referral ensure academic staff do not take on a quasi-counselling role.(45)

Utilising communication guidelines supports staff to communicate about mental health and wellbeing with evidence-based messaging that assists with clarity and consistency, can help to break down stigma and increase understanding of mental health.



UNIVERSITY STUDENT SERVICES: recognises the existing services universities typically provide through student services incorporating student engagement, student participation, wellbeing and development.

Universities already provide a range of direct services to support students who are experiencing issues or concerns related to their mental health and wellbeing.

The knowledge and expertise of those working in student services will help inform the broader needs and opportunities that should be addressed through a whole of university approach and facilitate informed and aligned actions to support student's experiencing distress or poor mental health.

The framework also provides an opportunity for universities to review and co-design mental health and wellbeing programs and services with students ensuring they are appropriate for the breadth of the student population and designed to be inclusive for all.

RESEARCH AND TRANSLATION: includes actions to a) build an accurate picture of student mental health and wellbeing through further research and data collection; and b) translate the existing and emerging evidence base into best practice.

There are significant gaps in the research and evidence base informing effective interventions to improve university student mental health. Improving the evidence base may contribute multiple benefits for universities potentially impacting both teaching and learning and research outputs.

Translation of available research into the treatment and prevention of mental ill-health and the promotion of mental health has been 'painfully slow'.⁽⁶⁵⁾ There is an opportunity for Australian universities to lead the way developing, testing and scaling evidence-based, innovative treatments and responses. Ensuring research and translation activities are visible and accessible to university students also demonstrates that the university is listening to students and taking their concerns seriously.



WHO IS THE 'MENTAL HEALTH SECTOR' SUPPORTING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS?

The mental health sector refers to a multidisciplinary mental health workforce, in a range of primary and specialist mental health settings, and a broad range of organisations and networks within the Australian mental health system that work to support the diverse university student population.

The mental health sector includes (but is not limited to):

- **General practitioners and allied health professionals** including psychologists, social workers, mental health nurses and occupational therapists.
- **Other health workers** that work in the areas of, for example, Aboriginal health, sexual health and alcohol and other drugs.
- **Local, state and federal government bodies** providing mental health services applicable to the university student population.
- **Education support specialists.**
- **Peer workforces.**
- **Primary Health Networks and Local Health Networks.**
- **Mental health organisations**, for example: Beyond Blue, SANE Australia, Mind Australia, Orygen and headspace.
- **Health promotion and prevention organisations** that include a focus on mental health, for example: Everymind, Prevention United, VicHealth.
- Providers of **overseas student health cover**

The mental health sector has a role in working together with the university sector to support university students' mental health and wellbeing. A co-ordinated, joined-up response, delivered through appropriate partnerships is required to provide effective support for students across the spectrum of mental health interventions.

FOCUS AREAS FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH SECTOR

Mental health and wellbeing does not sit neatly within the responsibility of any one organisation or sector, but requires action across a broad range of programs, environments and policies. Universities operate within a broader community where the responsibility for student mental health is shared across university and community-based services. In terms of student numbers, most universities are the size of large towns and given the nature of the populations that they serve it is important that relevant **mental health sector** organisations effectively plan to meet the needs of this population.

The framework identifies five focus areas for the mental health sector to support a response to improving university students' mental health and wellbeing. The focus areas provide important considerations for mental health sector organisations or service providers with a role in supporting university students' mental health and wellbeing.

PARTNERSHIPS: establish strategic partnerships with universities to better understand the needs of their populations and to consider potential research or evaluation opportunities.

Opportunities for the mental health sector (including those focused on awareness raising, self-help information and supports, as well as, the provision of primary care and tertiary care) to partner with universities exist across the continuum of interventions, from supporting mental health promotion and prevention approaches to ensuring students can access essential services and support for recovery and engagement with education.

Formal partnerships or MoUs can support the mental health sector and universities to deliver more efficient, effective services and inform decision making to better support university students' mental health and wellbeing. MoUs may operate at a local, state or national level depending on need.

A focus on referral protocols and practices, and ensuring good communication between universities and community-based partners in following up outcomes from referrals supports the notion of shared responsibility and providing improved care for students in need. This will also better position universities to provide academic considerations and support to students who are struggling or unwell.

PLANNING: ensuring provisions to meet the needs of university populations are included in mental health sector providers' and organisations' service planning and local governance arrangements.

As a shared responsibility, it is important for mental health sector providers and mental health organisations to work together with universities to understand and incorporate the needs of students into their service planning arrangements.

Local mental health service planners (such as Primary Health Networks, Local Health/Hospital Networks) along with local services are best placed to consider local contextual factors and incorporate a response which is inclusive of universities located within their relevant catchment areas in shared planning.

Shared planning can also contribute to efficiencies in the use and application of available and unique resources that universities can provide, particularly in research and evaluation.

CO-DESIGN SERVICES AND SUPPORTS: collaborate with university students and the broader university community to inform appropriate provision of supports and to improve engagement with providers.

Engage with university students and existing on-campus service providers within the catchment areas to understand the university specific and unique factors that impact on students' mental health and to co-design approaches that meet students' needs. Genuine collaboration with consumers and carers in all aspects of system planning, design, monitoring and evaluation is an expectation within government mental health frameworks.⁽⁵¹⁾ Working with university communities to inform the development of appropriate systems within the local context provides the opportunity to engage with a substantial, diverse population.

Evidence suggests that investment in strong connections at multiple levels leads to better quality services and ultimately saves time and allocates resources more effectively through an integrated and collectively planned approach. Co-creation and collaborative management allows organisations to design and deliver programs according to their strengths, the needs of the population they are serving and produce better outcomes for mental health consumers and lasting system improvements.⁽⁶⁶⁾

PARTNER WITH UNIVERSITIES IN A STEPPED CARE APPROACH TO PROVIDE TIMELY, ACCESSIBLE, AFFORDABLE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS: focusing on connecting students with the right care at the right time.

Mental health sector providers and organisations partnering with universities to facilitate a continuum of supports and services within a stepped care model informed by students’ needs and experiences.

A stepped care approach varies the intensity of the treatment interventions to the needs of the student. A hierarchy of interventions supports individuals as their needs change. It is critical that services in the community understand the limits of the service offerings available within the university and that students with mental health conditions beyond the remit of the counselling/ psychological supports offered on campus are successfully referred into community-based mental health care.

Re-organising and strengthening services aligned to a stepped care approach and tailored to the university context and student population would support students seeking help to access appropriate campus-based or community-based services while reducing the risk of delay for students with moderate to severe mental ill-health in accessing supports within the community.(10)

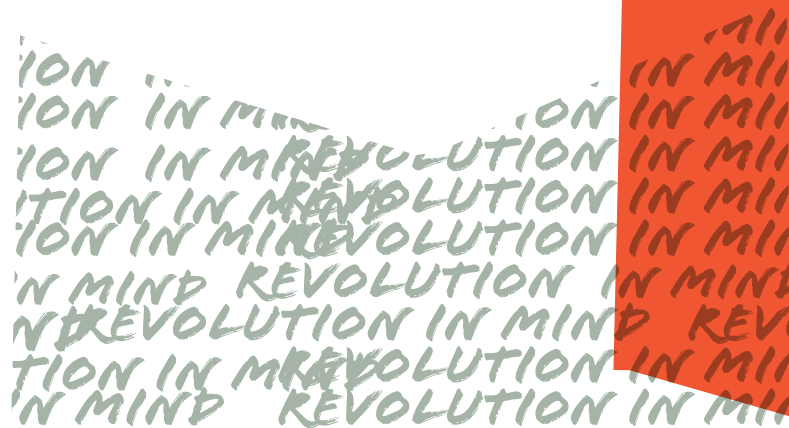
A range of strategies to facilitate timely, accessible and affordable services for students may include: low or no cost services, student-friendly, low stigma settings, no referral required, facilitating simple contact means, developmentally appropriate transitions into and out of care, evidence informed, individually tailored interventions, shared decision making and use of technology.

Other areas of focus for improved services include an emphasis on multidisciplinary, integrated services, building community capacity, uniting traditionally fragmented services and improving access to early intervention.(67)

SUPPORT EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS AS PART OF A RECOVERY FOCUSED SERVICE APPROACH: considering the diversity of the university population, particularly groups at increased risk of experiencing mental ill-health.

Mental health service delivery should include a focus on achieving both functional, as well as, clinical recovery. Therefore, it is important that dedicated and individualised supports for engagement or reengagement in education is embedded as a core component of clinical services.

Mental health services should actively work with universities to support individuals to engage or re-engage with higher education where this is a specific goal of the individual. Approaches should consider and be inclusive of students from different genders, sexual orientations, races, religions, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and students who are young, mature-aged, international, domestic, from remote and regional areas, from the range of equity groups, students with a disability and students with a lived experience of mental ill-health.



ENABLERS

Coordinated action across and within sectors and continuous improvement and innovation are included as enablers. Mental health and wellbeing is a shared responsibility and requires input from a range of different organisations and individuals willing to try something different, evaluate, iterate and continue working to bring about long term improvements and lasting change. These components should be planned for, and incorporated across all aspects of an approach to improving university student mental health and wellbeing.

COORDINATED ACTION: collaboration within and beyond the university.

Engage authentically with students and staff, increase internal collaboration, partner with external organisations and service providers, and explore broader collaboration opportunities to share ideas, research and good practice and to inform and enhance innovation. Opportunities for collaboration should be considered across all aspects of the framework model.

A collaborative, coordinated approach to action within the university, with students, across the sector and with external mental health partners will be most effective in avoiding duplication and increasing efficiencies. Collaboration can take many forms. The [International Association for Public Participation - IAP2 International](#) identifies multiple levels of engagement and participation and may be a useful guide for universities and potential partners.

Students should be involved early and often in designing, planning and implementing mental health and wellbeing initiatives. Meaningful student engagement can improve the relevance of university strategy, policy and practice and therefore increase the success of this work.

Stronger partnerships between community mental health service systems and universities can provide a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of students, staff, and the wider community, as well as improving planning, efficiencies and service provisions for the university community.

While delivering a program independently, might on the face of it appear to be less time and resource intensive, evidence suggests that investment in strong connections at multiple levels leads to better quality services and ultimately saves time and allocates resources more effectively through an integrated and collectively planned approach. Co-creation and collaborative management allows organisations to deliver programs according to their strengths, producing better outcomes for mental health consumers and creating lasting system improvements.(66)

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION: systematic data collection and a commitment to evaluation.

The framework supports a coordinated approach across the university and mental health sectors to trial, implement, share and scale up recommendations, improve research and data collection, and provide ongoing monitoring and advocacy on this issue.

Implementation of the framework will require an evaluation of component initiatives and activities, as well as the coordinated, whole of university response. An evaluation plan, incorporating both process and outcome indicators and including a strategy for dissemination and sharing of results with key stakeholders, is required.

Given the significant gaps in Australian research and data on the prevalence and nature of mental ill-health among university students, and on what works to improve students' mental health and wellbeing, the process of improvement will inherently be one of learning and discovery.

Integrated in planning and delivery of initiatives should be processes for seeking early feedback, constantly iterating, measuring what works and what does not - early and often - and understanding why. The framework itself should also be viewed as an iterative document, with the expectation that universities experiences will inform future adaptations.

As universities adapt the framework to meet the needs of their own students, planned evaluation approaches and priorities will vary accordingly. Actions could include:

- Continue to support regular counselling service surveys conducted by the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA).
- Support changes to existing national survey instruments, both within universities, such as the Student Experience Survey in Higher Education, and beyond universities, such as extending the Child and Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey to include 18-25 year olds.
- Identify relevant existing data sets within the university that may be useful in considering interactions or relationships with factors known to affect mental health and wellbeing.
- Develop information sharing policies between universities and mental health sector organisations and providers, to maximise efficient data exchange and to minimise gaps in service delivery and care.
- Continuous co-creation and student feedback to drive changes, incorporating a range of types of feedback or evaluation from simple 'have your say' approaches through to more rigorous data collection.

TAKING ACTION

With an overarching focus on coordinated action and continuous improvement and innovation, the framework is dynamic and adaptive, rather than static. There are multiple entry points and the framework is adaptable to individual contexts, enabling institutions to meet the unique needs of their student population while supporting ongoing cross-sector collaboration, improvement and innovation through a coordinated national approach.

To demonstrate a shared commitment to improve the mental health and wellbeing of university students, Australian universities are asked to commit to:

- Adopting the framework and committing to the guiding principles underpinning the framework.
- Developing a settings-based strategy, co-designed with students, to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the whole university community.
- Reporting yearly on actions taken and progress made to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students.

To address all components of the model, it is recommended that universities plan to address each of elements of the framework within the identified focus areas, for example using the following matrix:

ON IN M
 ON IN M
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 ON IN M
 ON IN M
 MIND REVOLUTION
 REVOLUTION IN M
 REVOLUTION



PLANNING MATRIX FOR UNIVERSITIES

FOCUS AREAS FOR THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR	Student wellbeing	Mental health promotion	Prevention	Early intervention	Treatment	Recovery
Leadership						
Governance						
University community and environment						
Teaching and learning						
Workforce						
University student services						
Research and translation						

FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH SECTOR, it is recommended that organisations or providers plan to address each of the focus areas for those elements in which they offer services or support

FOCUS AREAS FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH SECTOR	Identify elements in which organisation provides services/support (delete those that do not apply):					
	Student wellbeing	Mental health promotion	Prevention	Early Intervention	Treatment	Recovery
Partnerships						
Planning						
Co-design services and supports						
Partner with universities in a stepped care approach						
Support educational pathways						

GLOSSARY

MENTAL HEALTH

An umbrella term that encompasses a continuum of mental health states, including both good mental health and poor mental health and everything in between. It relates to how people think and feel, and how they cope with and respond to stressors in everyday life. The state of an individual's mental health varies throughout life and may be influenced by social, psychological, biological and cultural elements.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People prefer the term social and emotional wellbeing as it is seen as a better fit with a holistic view of health, encompassing the social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural wellbeing of a person.(68)

MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Encompasses mental health issues or problems (where cognitive, emotional or social abilities may be impacted, but diagnostic criteria for a mental illness are not met) and mental illness (significantly impacted cognitive, emotional or social abilities diagnosed as a clinical disorders).

MENTAL WELLBEING

A positive state of psychological and emotional health. It relates to the ability to function cognitively and emotionally across a range of aspects of life, such as in relationships or at work, despite ups and downs.

MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

Actions taken to protect, support and sustain positive mental health and wellbeing. Within the university context, this could include a focus on increasing student wellbeing and resilience, and creating supportive learning environments conducive to good mental health. It may incorporate actions to reduce inequalities, increase social capital, and address determinants of mental health relevant to the university context.

PREVENTION

Actions designed to prevent the onset of mental ill-health, reduce the duration and severity of mental ill-health, and/or lower the ongoing impact of mental ill-health. Actions may focus on reducing university-specific risk factors for mental ill-health and enhancing protective factors. A range of strategies targeting the whole university population, individuals or groups identified as being at high risk of developing mental ill-health and individuals at high-risk who show minimal but detectable signs of mental ill-health. Elements of prevention and promotion may be seen within the same actions and strategies.

EARLY INTERVENTION

Actions taken to prevent the incidence, severity and impact of mental ill-health for people experiencing early signs and symptoms of mental ill-health. Information, assessment and treatment are provided for those displaying the early signs and symptoms of a mental health problem or mental disorder to minimise the incidence of progression to a diagnosable condition and increase the likelihood of recovery. It may include indicated prevention interventions.

TREATMENT

Effective, evidence-based actions for individuals with diagnosed disorders. This may include a range of different approaches for someone experiencing mental ill-health to minimise the effects and promote recovery, such as medication, psychological therapies, psycho-social support, avoidance of risk factors (eg. drugs and alcohol), and self-management skills.

RECOVERY

Not the equivalent of cure, recovery refers to the ability to create and live a meaningful life and contribute to the community. It may include gaining independence, building healthy relationships, living an active life, understanding of one's abilities and disabilities, and a having a positive sense of self. In the university context, equitable, inclusive approaches to support students to maintain or re-engage with their education following an episode of mental ill-health, may promote recovery.

MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION SPECTRUM

A framework that underpins national mental health policy, and identifies the need for appropriate interventions at different stages in the development of mental ill-health. The framework incorporates promotion, prevention, early intervention, treatment, continuing care and rehabilitation/recovery and emphasises the need for action across the entire spectrum to enhance mental health outcomes.

The spectrum has been simplified for use within the university mental health framework to make it more accessible to a wider audience through more generalised categorisations.

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