

Saturday 1 July. Early Morning Session 8.00 – 8.30am

The impact of mental health in the university sector. A preliminary study.

Dr Margaret Carter, Associate Professor Abraham Francis, & Associate Professor Paul Pagliano, James Cook University

Recently, the popular press labelled Australians as a “Nation of Dropouts”. The Minister for Education blamed universities attributing low completion rates to a lack of transparency within universities. Other commentators from industry bodies such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry assign the blame to factors such as parental pressure to attend university and/or a lack of alignment of degrees with employment pathways. However, analysis of the factors impacting upon course completion suggests a more complex picture.

Studying at university while experiencing mental ill-health.

A grounded theory study

Dr Priscilla Ennals, Neami National & Professor Ellie Fossey, Monash University

The grounded theory study discussed in this presentation used a participatory framework to explore the experiences of university students experiencing mental ill-health. While between 20% - 25% of university students are estimated to experience mental ill-health, little has been understood from the perspectives of students themselves about their experiences and the impacts of their ill-health on their studies. This presentation presents one key finding, that students living with mental ill-health feel different but do all they can to manage that sense of difference in order to persist with their studies. Data were gathered through 21 in-depth interviews with 15 current students, and ten reference group meetings that involved discussions between six people with lived experience of mental ill-health and the three investigators. Rigorous comparative analysis of data revealed a theoretical understanding of the process of studying and how students with mental ill-health manage their felt sense of difference.

Being a student while living with mental illness involves doing all the usual student tasks, and in addition requires actively managing feeling different. Participants managed feeling different in three main ways, hanging in, taking action, and moving on. This is achieved through a range of actions that are effortful and time consuming. Thinking about the occupational demands of studying while living with mental ill-health provides insight into how services and supports are offered to, and accepted by students, reframing this group of students as resourceful and resilient. Sharing these findings with students who experience mental ill-health may decrease their sense of difference and isolation, and offer additional strategies for managing their experiences of difference.

Student support services – moving away from the margins. trialling a collaborative approach

Larissa Siliezar & Lisa Moody, James Cook University

Mental health is one of Australia's nine national health priority areas and significantly impacts on youth aged 16-24 (Veness, 2016). Successive governmental policies emphasise widening participation and growing numbers of young people enrolled in university studies identify as having a mental illness (Veness, 2016). This impacts significantly on student attrition and retention. Mental health challenges are one of the main reasons why students cease university studies. Despite this, few changes have occurred in university structures, staffing, processes, and curriculum to support the wellbeing of students (O'Donnell, 2016). Overwhelmingly, mental health and student support services remain on the periphery, marginalised from teaching, learning, and curriculum initiatives.

James Cook University (JCU) is a multi-campus institution with campuses in Cairns, Singapore, and Townsville and smaller study centres in Mount Isa, Thursday Island, and Mackay. Students come from many backgrounds, promoting a rich cultural and experiential diversity on campus. The university has a whole of institution approach to student transition and support. Recently, JCU embarked on the delivery of new open access pathways programs – in Townsville, Cairns, Singapore, and Brisbane. In this program 'intentional, structured, and proactive set[s] of strategies' are being trialled to enhance engagement and success of students. This includes the explicit inclusion of community building, resilience, and wellbeing in the curriculum. This presentation will provide an overview of the whole of institution approaches utilised at JCU around student support and the initial results of the pathways programs deliberate inclusion of student wellbeing measures in the curriculum.

Promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Higher Education

Associate Professor Debra Miles, James Cook University

This paper draws on research which examined the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in social work field education placements. Findings reveal students experience many instances of subtle and overt racism within placements which have significant implications for their emotional wellbeing. The presentation discusses strategies that can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on placement and enhance their mental health and wellbeing.

The JCU MBBS Mentor Program for International Students (MMP. IS). Supporting the transition of international students to Australia and the MBBS program

Simone Ross, Julie Graham, Reuben George

The JCU MBBS mentor program provides the opportunity for incoming international medical students to connect with senior MBBS students, the MBBS program, the Townsville environment, Australian culture and each other. The MMP.IS created in 2016, has an academic coordinator, however is a student led and student focussed program with the international representative of the JCU Medical Student Association as the Student Coordinator each year.

Student mentors are senior international medical students (years 2-6) who volunteer to support their junior colleagues in the transition to Australia. Mentors foster connectedness, and discuss any concerns with language discordance, communication styles and common language misunderstandings. They provide clear explanations of the MBBS program and educational requirements. In addition, they discuss food requirements and other shopping needs, accommodation requirements such as satisfaction and safety, as well as transport opportunities.

Each mentor has three to four mentees so as to also foster student connectedness between the year one mentees. In week 1, the mentees are advised of the program, and invited to come along to a welcome provided for international students by international students in which they meet their mentors. The program runs for 8 weeks of study period one and consists of both formal and informal face to face catch-ups and email communication, and the provision of online support.

An overview of the program and online support resource will be presented.

Care pedagogy, well-being and environmental stewardship

Marcia Thorne, James Cook University

Well-being promotes improved scholarship. Research supports linkages between fulfilling innate biophilic needs to develop eco-wellness, well-being, critical and higher order thinking, enhanced scholastic performance and environmental stewardship. Biophilic needs are described by Stephen Kellert (2012) and E O Wilson (1984) as the innate need for knowledge of and connection to the natural environment and the eco system services that support life. Environmental stewardship is defined as caring action to support and maintain the natural environment. Recent doctoral research conducted at James Cook University, examined the expression of environmental stewardship in