

# NITRO

## NonTraditional Research Outcomes

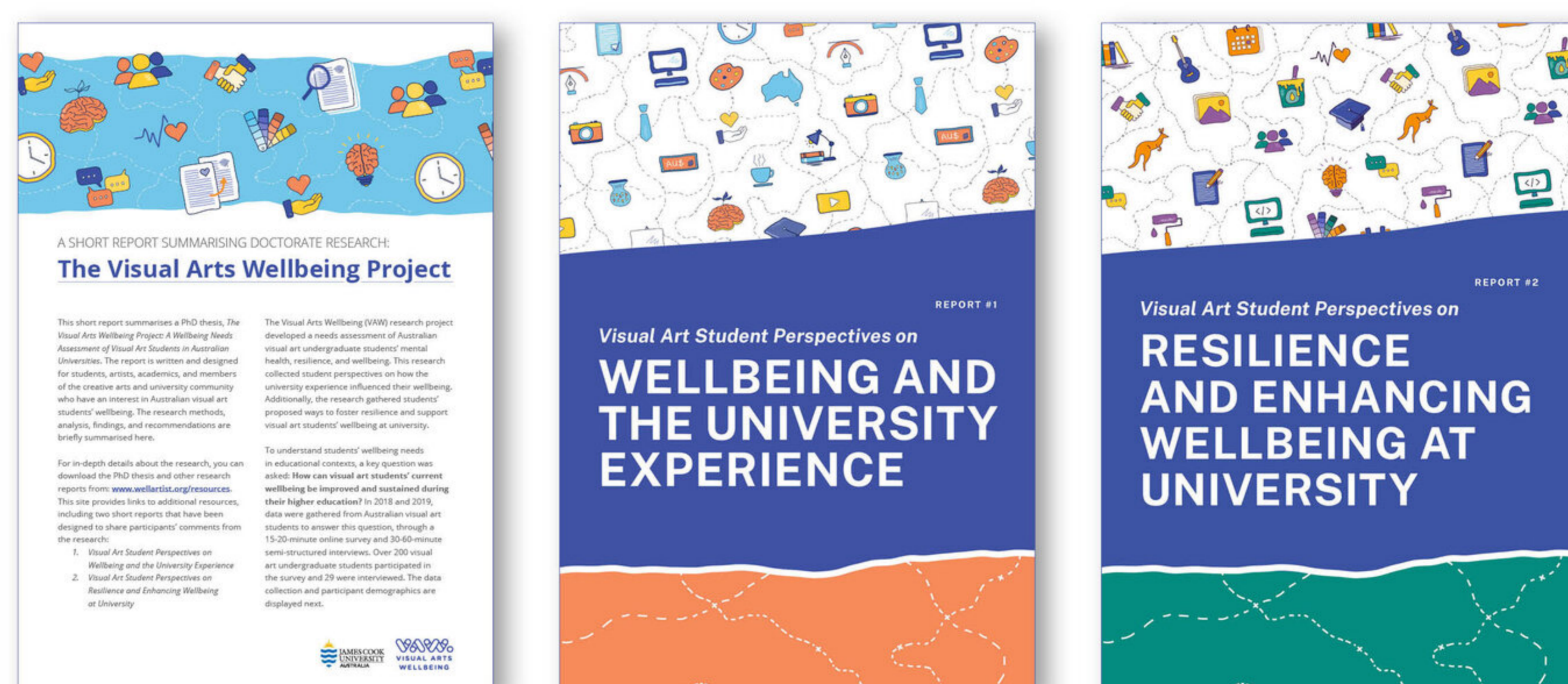
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### Transforming Visual Art Education to Benefit Students' Wellbeing

October 15, 2021

By Dr Eileen Siddins

As the landscape of higher education continues to shift in response to COVID-19, alternate art schools have become a competitive option for prospective university students. Comparisons between alternate art schools and Australian university degrees may focus on economic and structural differences, yet another key consideration necessitates that education systems support and protect students' wellbeing. Earlier this year (2021), I released findings from my doctorate research that explored Australian creative art undergraduate students' wellbeing needs and ways to address these needs within university settings. Although the research data were gathered before the pandemic, the participating students shared perspectives that apply to the current climate of creative art education in Australia. Many of these perspectives aligned with extant research literature and raised valuable insights that could be applied in Australian university settings. The following points briefly summarise some insights relevant to current circumstances and possible future options.



FURTHER DETAILS ABOUT THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH FINDINGS ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH OPEN-ACCESS REPORTS AT [WELLARTIST.ORG](http://WELLARTIST.ORG)

#### Sensitivity to Context

Implementing positive change to benefit creative art students' wellbeing requires careful consideration. Students are primarily responsible for their wellbeing, yet their efforts to improve their university experience can be disempowered or hindered by existing systems, including the university learning environment and culture, students' families and workplaces, and local creative communities. My research shows that active transformation within university settings needs to be cultivated by empowering students to enhance and protect their wellbeing, while also responding to students who are experiencing educational challenges and mental health difficulties. This approach necessitates a multi-levelled model that emancipates students from harmful power structures, accommodates diversity, and cultivates a sense of inclusion, belonging, and agency. Rather than implementing immediate change, I propose that creative art academic and professional staff ease into new aspects of their roles by implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of change in manageable increments. As an initial step, creative art academic and professional staff could identify the nuances of each cohorts' demographics, their wellbeing needs, opinions on their university experience, and disciplinary strengths.

*Some of the creative art students who participated in my research viewed conversations about wellbeing as overly clinical, irrelevant, or meaningless in university settings. To negate creative art students' disengagement from positive transformation, wellbeing-enabling strategies need to align with student motivations and disciplinary aspirations.*

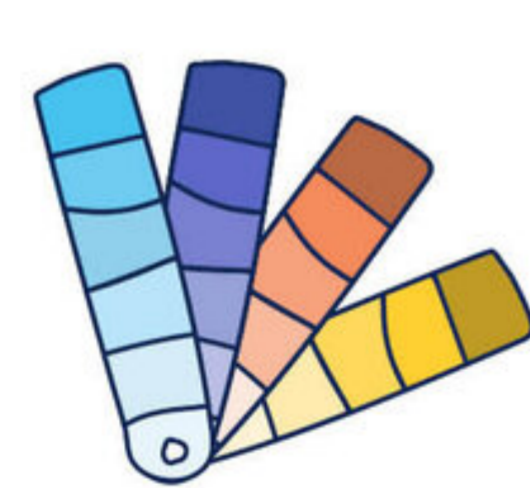
#### Building upon Students' Disciplinary Motivations and Strengths

Some of the creative art students who participated in my research viewed conversations about wellbeing as overly clinical, irrelevant, or meaningless in university settings. To negate creative art students' disengagement from positive transformation, wellbeing-enabling strategies need to align with student motivations and disciplinary aspirations. The participating students' creative practice was often a key motivator that was linked to experiencing higher levels of engagement, wellbeing, mental health, or resilience. Other research literature has similarly identified the wellbeing benefits of creative practice (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) for artists and wider Australian communities (Fielding & Trembath, 2019). In addition to participants' motivations to practice art, many were also interested in qualifying for work in their field and found it meaningful to gain recognition from professionals in their creative arts community. By learning from authentic, meaningful and wellbeing-enabling content in the context of creative professional development, students may be more inclined to cultivate their resilience within university settings. Some examples of wellbeing-enabling content are provided next.

*Positive change enacted by creative art educators and students is enabled or restricted by the decisions of key stakeholders, including senior university staff. Consequently, strong leadership and long-term commitments are required to direct all members of the creative arts and university community towards transformation that supports student wellbeing.*

#### Weaving Wellbeing Topics into the Fabric of Visual Art Curricula

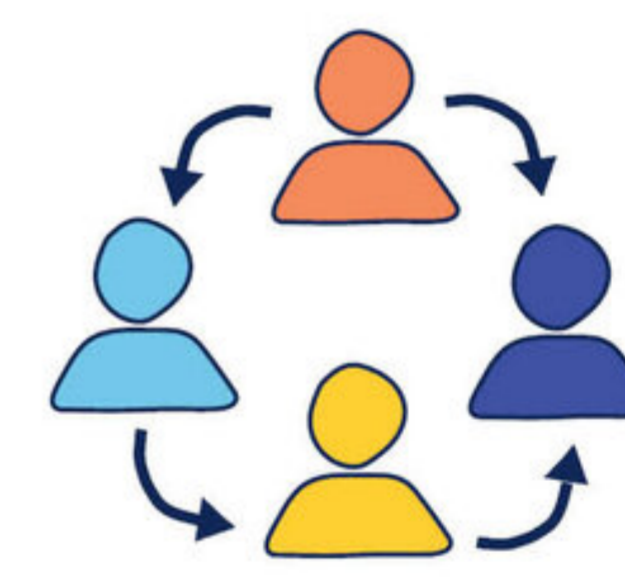
It is possible to position wellbeing as a key feature of creative art education. For example, students' resilience and awareness of strategies to manage university and creative work pressures could be prioritised as learning outcomes. Classroom discussions could highlight research evidence and anecdotal examples of relevant artists who managed challenges during their education and creative careers. Furthermore, complex wellbeing topics may be more engaging for students if they are given the freedom to research and articulate their knowledge using creative practice. Students could develop creative tools, artwork, or campaigns reflecting ways that artists foster healthy work lifestyles and manage mental health difficulties. Extant research literature provides relevant examples including students' collaborative critical practice to interrogate how media reinforces stereotypes (Roxburgh & Caratti, 2018), and an exhibition contextualising what is described as mad art (Reid et al., 2019).



Build upon students' disciplinary motivations and strengths



Implement wellbeing-enabling strategies into curricula



Involve the community in efforts to enhance students' wellbeing

SOME INSIGHTS FROM THE RESEARCH

#### A Community Effort

Positive change enacted by creative art educators and students is enabled or restricted by the decisions of key stakeholders, including senior university staff. Consequently, strong leadership and long-term commitments are required to direct all members of the creative arts and university community towards transformation that supports student wellbeing. Professional and academic staff, healthcare services, creative art practitioners, alumni, and students can partake in efforts to establish learning environments that are ethical, safe, and supportive. As many in the university community are keenly aware, change in the interest of improved outcomes does involve some level of risk and expenditure of resources. However, I believe that the costs are far outweighed by the benefits of enhancing creative art students' agency and wellbeing, to ensure our creative art students are well equipped to navigate the current climate of the Australian arts sector.

#### References

Fielding, K., & Trembath, J. L. (2019). *Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity*. <https://humanities.org.au/our-work/a-new-approach>

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Roxburgh, M., & Caratti, E. (2018). The Design of Stereotype and the Image. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 37(3), 454-468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12140>

**Dr Eileen Siddins** has experience as an artist, educator, and researcher at James Cook University. Eileen's research has contributed knowledge regarding the wellbeing needs of Australian visual art students in higher education, to inform future curriculum design. You can find more information about her research at [wellartist.org](http://wellartist.org).

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