

# Canine Support Program: Student perceptions and preferences at a regional university and implications for health, well-being, and student support enhancements

Vana Tom  | Jemma C. King  | Kristin E. McBain-Rigg 

College of Public Health, Medicine, and Veterinary Sciences, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, Australia

## Correspondence

Jemma C. King, James Cook University, College of Public Health, Medicine, and Veterinary Sciences, 1 James Cook Drive, Douglas, Townsville, QLD 4811, Australia.  
Email: [jemma.king@jcu.edu.au](mailto:jemma.king@jcu.edu.au)

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## Abstract

**Issue Addressed:** Canine Support Programs (CSPs) are a potential solution to growing university student support demands. While current studies focus on the impacts of CSPs, there is limited understanding of the views and expectations of tertiary students about CSPs. This study explored the perceptions and preferences of students in an Australian regional university about CSPs.

**Methods:** A questionnaire with multiple choice and open-ended questions surveyed residential students' perspectives about CSP. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical tests and thematic analysis for open responses.

**Results:** Majority (98%) of participants (sample  $n = 48$ ) would support a CSP on campus. Frequent, small-group interactions of  $\geq 15$  min involving physical contact were preferred. Dog disposition, welfare-trained handlers, and veterinary certification were important aspects of program safety. Participants strongly agreed a CSP would improve mental health and well-being, relieve stress, reduce feelings of homesickness, provide support, comfort, and enable social interactions.

**Conclusion:** There is strong support among the study population for CSP to be established on campus. This study supports earlier research that CSP has benefit potential for new, stressed, and/or students who love dogs. The preferences of students should inform program design to enhance utility and impact. This aligns with Health Promoting Universities and College's Okanagan Charter principle of 'engaging student voices'. More institutional awareness and support for CSPs will be necessary for integration.

**So What?** This study reveals the need for tailored and creative student support beyond traditional offerings including those that focus on student well-being and social initiatives. CSPs can be utilised as an advocate, enabler, and medium for mental health promotion action and well-being support for tertiary students; thereby, contributing to the 'Health Promoting University' agenda in Australia. It also reinforces the need for a Health in All Policies approach to be incorporated into our tertiary

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education sector. Future actions should focus on improving institutional awareness, support, and sector implementation.

#### KEYWORDS

Canine Support Program, health promoting universities, mental health, students, university, well-being

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Universities have a critical role in health promotion due to their unique societal position of influence and authority.<sup>1-3</sup> A health promoting university integrates health as a part of institutional culture embedding health in its policies, built infrastructure, and activities; consistent with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Health In All Policy (HiAP) approach,<sup>3,4</sup> and the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.<sup>5</sup> The International Health Promoting Universities and Colleges (IHPU&C) is a world body established in 1998 to advocate and provide guidelines for health promotion in universities.<sup>1,3</sup> IHPU&C's Okanagan Charter provides the framework for action for partner universities.<sup>6</sup> The Australian Health Promoting Universities Network (AHPUN) is affiliated to IHU&C, with 25 member universities as of 2016.<sup>7</sup>

Mental health and well-being are prime areas of focus for health promoting universities.<sup>1,8</sup> Studies show that tertiary students are at increased risk of social, emotional, and mental health distress.<sup>9,10</sup> These have been exacerbated during the current coronavirus disease COVID-19 pandemic, which has had an unprecedented impact on the tertiary sector worldwide.<sup>11,12</sup> In a study that surveyed 787 students in an Australian university, 86.8% indicated COVID-19 had significantly hindered their studies while 65.3% reported their well-being was negatively impacted.<sup>13</sup> According to the Australian National Union of Students (NUS), students in Australian universities struggling with psychological and mental stress have been an enduring problem.<sup>3</sup> A study conducted by the NUS in 2016 found up to 95% of adults in Australian universities struggled with mental health, which affected their studies and overall health status.<sup>14</sup> This is also reflected in a survey of student support managers in universities across Australia, which revealed that institutions lacked capacity to meet increasing student demand for counselling services.<sup>15</sup> Provision of student support programs should cater to the diverse needs of students, including those who reside on campus who may have unique needs and are also proximal to the program delivery.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines mental health as emotional, psychological, and social well-being.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the delivery of tailored mental health promotion programs in university settings is paramount. Health promotion empowers people to improve their health, which includes mental health and social well-being; through advocacy, enabling, and mediation.<sup>17,18</sup> According to WHO, the aim of mental health promotion is to enable people and communities to realise their potential, cope with stresses, and be productive members of a community; which The Australian Mental Health Policy agrees to.<sup>19</sup>

Universities are an ideal place for creating good practice—socially, professionally, and emotionally. A focus on non-scholarly citizen development is essential and usually occurs via the ancillary services and supports offered under a 'student life' portfolio. There is a real need to ensure that these ancillary supports are authentically offered and embedded within the university sector. Evidence shows that employers prefer graduates who demonstrate strong emotional intelligence.<sup>20</sup> Now that COVID-19 restrictions have eased it is an opportune moment, for universities to reflect on mechanisms to better support the well-being of students. Students may need much broader social support than is currently widely on offer, such as implementing creative evidence-based health promotion and well-being support projects. The process for this in the university setting should involve (1) securing political commitment, (2) giving visibility to health, (3) making institutional changes, and (4) developing innovative action for health.<sup>1</sup> As a precursor, health and well-being needs to be valued in order to drive this process.<sup>21</sup> This will require needs assessment and consultation to ensure feasibility and inform relevant program design, which is one of the core principles of IHPU&C's Okanagan Charter.<sup>6,22</sup> Involving senior university management is a key factor 'securing political commitment' to ensure program success.<sup>1</sup> University of Melbourne's social and emotional learning program supported by the Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training, is an example.<sup>23</sup>

A Canine Support Program (CSP) is an example of an innovative evidence-based program for student mental, social, and emotional health, and well-being support that is being increasingly adopted by universities worldwide.<sup>10,24-28</sup> It typically involves brief interactions between a student and a suitably trained dog. Several randomised controlled trials (RCTs) revealed that students who were exposed to this interaction showed significant decreases in levels of stress compared with controls.<sup>10,29-31</sup> Only a few Australian universities have integrated CSPs in their student support services such as the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney.<sup>7</sup> Research regarding CSPs in Australian universities is scarce. In a study conducted at Deakin University, organisational- and program-level considerations such as university policies and animal welfare need to be addressed if a CSP were to be successfully implemented in the university.<sup>22</sup> There are currently no Australian based studies that explore students' perceptions about CSPs as a health and well-being support program. The aim of this study, therefore, was to understand the perceptions and attitudes of students in a regional Australian university towards CSPs as a health and well-being support program on campus. The objectives were to (1) ascertain the support for a CSP among the students, (2) explore their perception of its potential health and well-being impact,

(3) and their preferences for design, provision, and setting characteristics.

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 | Methodology

This study was an exploratory research design employing a survey questionnaire, and the target participants were the students residing at a regional university in the on campus accommodation. Exploratory research, as the name suggests, is usually an initial study that 'explores' a phenomena or problem to characterise and better understand it. Exploratory studies are perfect for examining new issues and addressing all types of research questions such as what, why, and how?<sup>32</sup>

### 2.2 | Survey tool

The survey consisted of a questionnaire which had open and closed-ended, multiple choice, and scaled questions. Some questions were adapted from similar studies from Haggerty and Mueller<sup>33</sup>; and Foreman et al.,<sup>34</sup> while the validated Coleman Dog Attitude Scale (C-DAS)<sup>35</sup> was adapted for the scaled questions on students' attitudes towards dogs. Only 7 of the 24 scaled questions of C-DAS were adapted. There were a total of 40 questions. Nine sections of the questionnaire were: (1) Information sheet which described the survey, containing a consent section, (2) Demographic details, (3) Experience with and perceptions about Pet Support Programs (PSP), (4) Perceptions about a CSP on campus, (5) Perception of a CSP design, (6) Perception of canine type involved in a CSP, (7) Attitude towards dogs, (8) Perceived impacts of a CSP, and (9) Barriers and enablers of a CSP.

### 2.3 | Setting, participants, and sampling method

The study was conducted in a regional university in Queensland Australia, in the largest of its three main campuses. Participants were recruited from the three residential colleges of the university (Combined capacity to accommodate 1600 students). Only students that were residing in these residential colleges during the time of the study were eligible to participate in the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Interested persons would enter the survey by clicking on the e-link or by scanning the QR code. These were circulated and advertised throughout the residential colleges by the residential college managers, as well as through the university-wide electronic communication. The landing page of the survey in Qualtrics was the information sheet explaining the survey. Respondents would proceed onto answering the study questions only after giving consent. The expected amount of time to complete the survey was 15–20 minutes and the survey remained open for just over 3 weeks after it was published, from September 8 to October 4, 2021. All responses were anonymous and only response progression of  $\geq 40\%$  were analysed.

This study received ethical approval from the host institution's University Human Research Ethics Committee (H8542) on September 3, 2021.

### 2.4 | Data analysis

Data analysis involved descriptive and statistical analysis, as well as thematic and content analysis for the open-response questions. Thematic analysis adhered to guidelines by Braun and Clarke<sup>36</sup> while the EdWordle software (<http://www.edwordle.net/>) was used for content analysis. The descriptive and statistical analysis was done using IBM SPSS Statistical data analysis software Version 27. Descriptive statistics mostly involved frequencies while some cross-tabulations were done to test for association between variables using the Chi-square test for independence. The internal validity for the scale used was tested using the Cronbach alpha test.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Participant characteristics

Although 62 students consented to participate in the survey, only data from 48 respondents were eligible for analysis. The majority ( $n = 31$ ; 64.6%) of respondents had been living in the residential colleges for <2 years. Eighty-five percent ( $n = 41$ ) of the respondents were below the age of 22. Seventy-nine percent ( $n = 38$ ) were females, whereas 21% ( $n = 10$ ) were males. Forty-six (95.8%) of the respondents were domestic students (Australian residents) and only two (4.2%) were international. The known residential student occupancy rates during the year, including all individuals who resided during the calendar year and not just for the period of the survey were 778. Suggesting a response rate of just over 6%.

### 3.2 | Attitude towards dogs and support for a CSP

Forty-four (92%) of the participants owned or currently own pets and 38 (77.1%) agreed that pets were integral to their lives. The majority (>95.0%) of the respondents had positive attitudes towards dogs and 38 (90.5%) agreed dogs would reduce their stress. Correspondingly, over 38 (>90.0%) disagreed they would avoid or hate dogs (Figure 1). The Cronbach alpha test performed on the modified C-DAS scale showed an excellent level of internal consistency with a result of  $\alpha = .96$ . All ( $n = 47$ , 97.9%) the respondents except one indicated they would support a PSP or CSP initiative on the university campus as well as specifically in the residential colleges.

### 3.3 | Preference for a CSP

The majority of students preferred relatively longer dog interaction time lengths, favoured the most frequent visit option of twice a week,

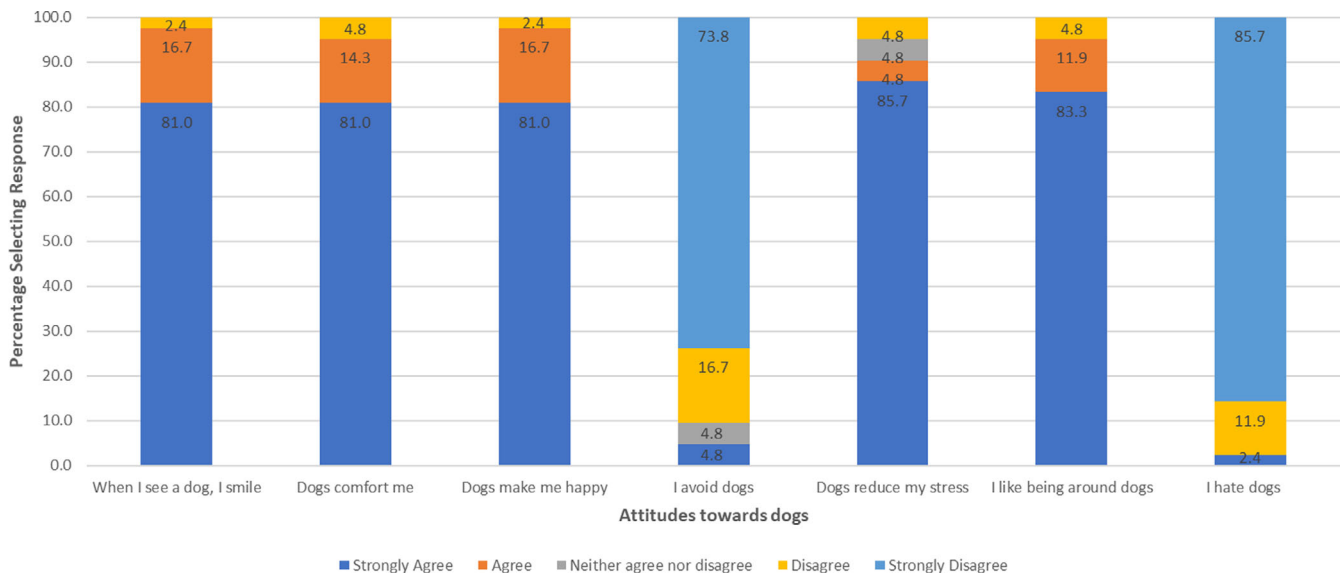


FIGURE 1 Students' attitudes towards dogs on a one to five level of agreement scale adapted from the Coleman Dog Attitude Scale.<sup>37</sup>



FIGURE 2 The preferred dog breeds (open response; more prominent equates to higher frequency).

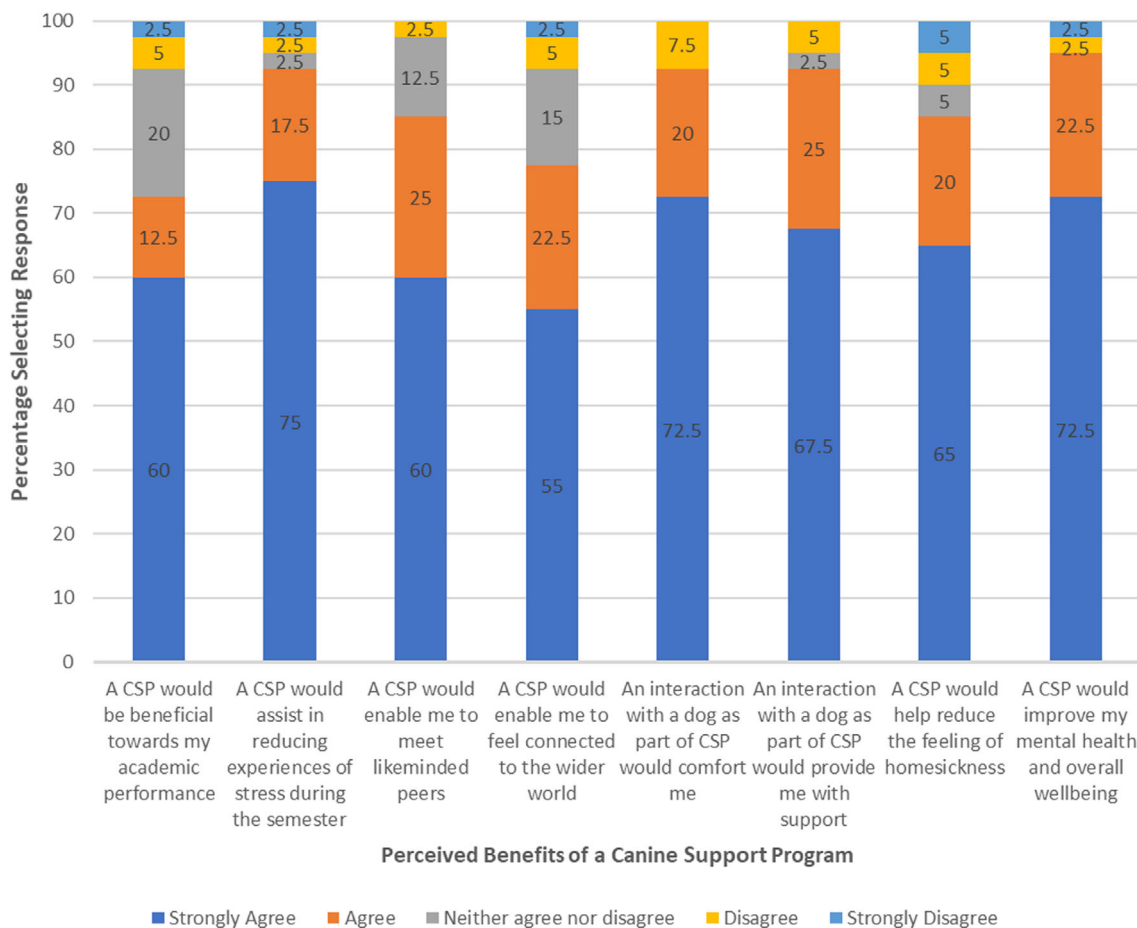
and wanted interactions that involved touching or hugging the dog, playing with the dog, and walking the dog. They wanted small interaction groups consisting of two to four people. Each residential college having its own CSP visit was the most preferred.

Regarding the dog type, respondents chose medium-sized dogs. Content analysis through EdWordle Word Cloud showed Labradors as the most favoured dog breed, followed by Golden Retrievers and 'Any breed' (Figure 2). Dogs with calm and friendly temperaments that remain calm among strangers and new environments were deemed suitable. Playful, energetic, and happy dogs that can be touched, patted, and cuddled were other dog behaviour characteristics desired (Figure 3). From a list of safety requirements provided, veterinarian certification on the health status of the animal, rabies vaccination, and negative faecal exam for intestinal parasites were considered important.

### 3.4 | Who will a CSP benefit and what are its perceived benefits?

Respondents believed a CSP would be well attended ( $n = 44$ , 93.6%) and agreed it would benefit them ( $n = 37$ , 92.5%). It would be useful to all groups of students, especially those taking challenging courses. Figure 4 shows the eight potential benefits of a CSP and how much respondents believed it was true for them. As can be seen, respondents agreed (mostly strongly agreed) that a CSP would improve their overall mental health and well-being, reduce feelings of homesickness, provide support and comfort, connect students to like-minded peers and the wider world, and reduce stress during the semester. Usefulness of a CSP towards academic performance was not as strongly supported relative to the other categories (only 72.5% [ $n = 29$ ]) although a considerable number ( $n = 24$ ; 60%) strongly agreed.

**FIGURE 3** The preferred dog temperaments (open response; more prominent equates to higher frequency).



**FIGURE 4** Students' perceived benefits of a Canine Support Program (CSP).

Correspondingly, thematic analysis of the open responses yielded three categories of CSP benefits. First, a CSP will benefit those who left behind homes and pet(s) and are missing them, which included international students. For example, one response said, 'a lot of people miss their pets back home'. Second, a CSP would help relieve stress and support mental health and well-being. A respondent

remarked, 'animals do an extremely good job in cheering people up'. This would be through social interaction, and a play and relaxation environment that a CSP would enable. Third, a CSP would be an opportunity for students who have a strong affinity with dogs to spend time with one; thus, feeling happy and comforted. Respondents indicated many students enjoy interacting with canines in response to

the question on how a CSP would benefit students. For example, one respondent just said, 'most students love dogs'.

For open responses on enablers and barriers of a CSP, strong student support for a CSP was considered an important enabler, while the university's (potential) lack of awareness of CSPs and preparedness to implement it were identified as barriers. Restrictive policies and funding limitations were also mentioned when asked why they think the institution does not currently have a formal CSP. For example, one respondent outlined: 'I think it could be due to the fact that it would be very difficult to organise initially and would likely cost a lot of money'. Another eloquently expressed: 'Because it is a less formal way of managing mental health, and it is seemingly more progressive than they have been willing to go in the past'. It was acknowledged when asked about factors that would help and present hurdles to implementing a CSP that student, staff, and executive support would be vital and that health and safety guidelines might be a hurdle.

### 3.5 | Statistical analysis

Of those who lived on campus for  $\leq 1$  year, 78.6% indicated a CSP would help them cope with homesickness, although the perception that a CSP would reduce the feeling of homesickness was not significantly associated with the length of time living on campus ( $\leq 1$  year or  $> 1$  year),  $\chi^2 = 2.51$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p > .05$ . Preferred length of interaction time was significantly associated with the length of time living on campus,  $\chi^2 = 11.76$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ . About 94.0% of students who lived on campus for  $> 1$  year indicated they wanted to have 20 min interaction time versus 41.9% of who lived on campus  $\leq 1$  year. The type of interaction (interaction only and interaction plus observation) was not significantly associated with the length of time living on campus ( $\leq 2$  years or  $\geq 3$  years),  $\chi^2 = 0.55$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### 3.6 | Other considerations

Not prioritising a CSP in resources, funds, and organisational effort, as well as lack of knowledge about the program were stated as potential reasons why the university did not have a CSP. Respondents thought implementing a CSP would be a very important decision by the university that would benefit both students and the university. This was expressed by respondents indicating in the prompt for 'other thoughts' that 'it should already be happening' and 'It would be the best decision that [the institution] has ever made'.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The support for a CSP to be introduced on the campus as a health and well-being support program was overwhelming, supported by 98% of respondents. The fact most of the respondents owned a dog, had positive attitudes towards them, and considered them integral to their lives, implies CSPs would be most valued by and benefit students

who have exposure and affinity to dogs. These participant characteristics are common in numerous surveys and RCT studies on CSPs in university settings.<sup>10,24,25,29-31,37</sup> Although those who may not be acquainted with dogs may still benefit from CSPs as indicated by a few of the respondents who did not own dogs but still supported it. It emphasises the need for tailored approaches to student support and health promotion in universities.

The three categories of students identified from the open responses on who would benefit from a CSP is consistent with other studies. The first category was students who left homes, pets, and usual support systems for the first time and were missing them; which agrees with studies that show this student category is vulnerable to social and emotional distress associated with feelings of homesickness, nostalgia, and challenges of settling into the university environment; and are usually freshmen.<sup>23,38-40</sup> Correspondingly, almost 80% of students who lived on campus accommodation for  $\leq 1$  year and aged below 22 who supported CSP matched the freshmen profile. The second category consisting of students who experience stress due to factors such as academic demands and negative life experiences, is well supported by several RCT studies which have demonstrated CSPs effectiveness in relieving stress among university students. For example, a RCT study conducted by Binfet<sup>10</sup> found that college students who were exposed to interactions with a visiting dog reported significant decreases in stress and enhanced connectedness to peers compared with the control group which were not exposed. Similar results were found in another RCT study by Crossman et al.<sup>41</sup> The unconditional love shown by pets including dogs is shown to inspire motivation and emotional resilience which may be one reason.<sup>42</sup> The final category comprising of students who love dogs, is reflected by the fact majority of the respondents and supporters of a CSP in this study owned dogs and indicated dogs were integral to their lives. The majority of 'dog loving' participant characteristics reported in numerous similar studies elsewhere<sup>10,24,25,30,31,37</sup> strengthens this inference. It likely reflects the psychology of experiencing satisfaction, happiness, and improved well-being as a result of being connected with an object of admiration and adoration<sup>43</sup>; as well as the mental health, well-being, loneliness reduction, and physical health enhancement effect of giving and receiving affection.<sup>44,45</sup> As such, it reveals CSPs potential to enable 'healthy leisure' which is feeling well mentally, physically, and socially, while at the same time experiencing the emotions of pleasure, relaxation, and entertainment.<sup>42</sup> Health wise, research shows that dog ownership can increase physical activity and reduce risk of mortality, and more leisure equates to additional health benefits. CSPs reflect the intersections among health, well-being, and leisure domains for both humans and, potentially with the correct program parameters and breed selection, animal participants.<sup>42</sup>

The responses on how much students will benefit from each of the eight potential benefits of a CSP adapted from C-DAS<sup>35</sup> complements the three categories of beneficiaries mentioned above. There was mostly very strong agreement that a CSP would reduce the feeling of homesickness, provide support and comfort, enable connectivity to peers and the wider world, reduce stress, and benefit academic

performance. These are consistent with and strongly supported by other research elsewhere.<sup>10,24,25,30,31,37</sup> The need to meet peers and build social networks further points to the fact CSPs might offer the perfect opportunity for students to meet like-minded peers in a non-judgemental, low anxiety producing setting where attention can be directed towards a dog. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of dogs in enabling social interactions and being a social catalyst in settings or through activities where social norms may typically prohibit such interaction.<sup>42</sup> This is especially important given the disruptions to social interaction the COVID-19 pandemic has caused and the need to restore and enhance social interaction and connectivity post-pandemic on campuses.<sup>46</sup>

Preferences about the characteristics and design of a CSP demonstrate the importance of user (student) informed program design that will ensure optimal utility and benefits. It aligns to HPU&C's Okanagan Charter principle of 'engaging student' voices'.<sup>3</sup> Example, this survey has revealed the type of dog that should be involved, type of interactions, and the important safety aspects of a CSP. This data will be useful towards program planning and development if a CSP were to be implemented. Barriers identified, especially policy restrictions and the challenges of organising the CSP align with the results of a study conducted at Deakin University in Australia.<sup>22</sup> In that study, it was identified that for CSPs to be implemented there would be a need to review and adapt relevant university policies and address program matters such as suitable locations/facilities as well as cater for animal welfare. For example, the current policy does not allow pets on campus.<sup>22</sup> Thus, if the institution was to implement a CSP, its current policy needs to be reviewed and adapted, which in turn calls for political commitment and the need to secure it from the onset.<sup>1</sup> The concern about animal welfare is echoed by pet owners, handlers, and animal welfare groups. According to Young et al.,<sup>42</sup> an ideal human-animal interaction for health and leisure is when both experience physical, mental, and social well-being as a result. Therefore, a CSP program should ensure both animal welfare and benefit, that is, the dog's health, pleasure, and contentment, are adequately considered and catered for.

Findings that were novel to this study and add to knowledge in this field were, to the authors' knowledge, this study was the first to explore the perceptions of students in an Australian university about CSPs. The only other Australian university setting-based publication on the subject explored the political and program-level enablers and barriers.<sup>22</sup> Second, this study obtained responses from a specific student population, the residential students in campus provided accommodation. Third, whilst the type of students identified who might benefit from a CSP are similar to those in other studies, this study categorised them into three groups. These were (1) students who are new to campus and adjusting to university life, (2) students experiencing pressure and stress, and (3) students who have affinity for dogs and desire to spend time with one.

The outcome of this study will contribute towards a student perspective about CSPs and support any further institutionally based CSP feasibility studies, at least in the Australian context. It brings awareness to the university management, specifically those involved in student support, about CSPs and the value in capturing student perceptions of

and potential demand for program creation, which will inform program design. It reveals the need for tailored and innovative support programs. The study outcomes can also be an information source for Australian universities who are already practising health promoting university principles or considering CSPs as a potential program to integrate. In addition, it sheds light on the value of these institutions working with relevant bodies like IHPU&C and AHPUN to advance the health promoting university agenda.

The strong agreement that a CSP would foster social interaction and connectivity signifies the necessity for universities as well as higher education authorities to seek creative approaches to ensure this, alongside the more traditional platforms. Focusing on student well-being and social initiatives is imperative given the impact and disruptions the COVID-19 pandemic has caused. Other documented mechanisms to achieve this include curriculum initiatives,<sup>47</sup> the use of surveys to support identification of programming initiatives,<sup>48</sup> student-led events,<sup>49</sup> and peer-to-peer programs.<sup>50</sup> Advancing student focused and co-designed approaches are the future for student support programs and is a recommendation for future institutional efforts. Making policy space for student-led and co-designed health and well-being initiatives is required. This approach necessitates multidirectional efforts to both construct and centre health and ideally move from purely goal oriented policies to health and well-being-orientated ones.<sup>21</sup> It challenges our living values at the same time as it attempts to permeate structures. In permeating them it restructures them to being human orientated, at a starting point. This enables structures (physical, human, social, philanthropic) and philosophy that help to define, simultaneously, how we want to be in the world and who we actually are, at an institutional level.

This study engaged residential students who are optimally positioned to be exposed to on-campus student support programs such as a CSP. Furthermore, this was supported by the identification that this cohort is removed from existing support networks, both human and animal. Strengths of this study were its timeliness and its resource and cost efficiency. It has not been without limitations though. An approximate response rate has been determined based on all residential student numbers for the calendar year. This number includes all residential student numbers and not for the specific time the survey was deployed. Based on these numbers the response rate was low. However, it should be acknowledged that promotion of the research and thereby recruitment focused on three colleges thus the response rate is likely to be higher than specified. As a volunteer participation survey, there was a high chance of participant bias as shown in most participants being dog owners. Future studies should involve random selection of the target population and larger participation numbers to obtain a representative outcome. Finally, the study outcome reveals the need for further studies such as application to the wider student body and university preparedness for the program.

This study explored the perceptions of students living in the campus residential accommodations at a regional university about their interest in, potential health and well-being impacts and preferences of a CSP. Respondents were supportive of a CSP on campus. Strong student support was perceived as necessary for implementation of a CSP in the

university, while the university's lack of awareness about and preparedness for it were considered barriers. These findings are supported by wider literature that confirms CSPs as an effective mental health and well-being support program for university students. Advancing tailored, creative student support offerings to include options, which are co-designed are the future for student support programs. Such initiatives will also contribute to the health promoting universities agenda.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Vana Tom  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9926-0782>

Jemma C. King  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2740-9861>

Kristin E. McBain-Rigg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6597-1359>

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