Curtin Student Guild

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health

April 2019

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The Curtin Student Guild welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into mental health with a specific focus on how mental health issues affect student populations in the higher education sector. Ensuring that university students are successful in their studies and able to get the most out of their university experience necessitates a full-system response, one that universities and the government must work together collaboratively to achieve.

Prevalence of Mental Health Issues in Students

An Australian survey on the mental health status of tertiary students by Headspace and the National Union of Students showed that 65% of students aged 16-25 years reported high or very high psychological distress, while 35.4% had thoughts of self-harm or suicide[1]. A similar report analysing findings across three Australian national surveys that were conducted in 2007-2008 found that students were more likely to experience mild to moderate levels of psychological distress than non-student populations[2]. Results from the Headspace survey also found that 98% of university students aged 16-25 reported experiencing at least one symptom of mental ill-health during their time at university[3].

Factors Influencing Mental Health Status of Students

In 2017, The Australian Human Rights Commission undertook a project on sexual assault and sexual harassment of university students which found that one in four students reported being sexually harassed in a 'university setting' on at least one occasion[4]. The findings of the report demonstrate that a significant number of students at university campuses across Australia may have been the victims of crimes which have the potential to impact their mental health in a negative way. In order to assist these students, mental health support services need to be properly resourced and accessible for all.

More than ever, students are experiencing high levels of stress associated with lifestyle factors related to financial strain, unemployment, graduate employability, and work or study pressures. A Universities Australia report found that most domestic undergraduate students (58%) are worried about their financial situation and students of low socioeconomic status are more likely (63%) to be worried[5]. Nearly a third (30%) of full-time domestic undergraduate students are also working more than 20 hours a week[6]. Accordingly, a significant number of students are now living below the poverty line and have been found to carry 30% more debt in 2012 than in 2006[7]. Stallman (2010) found that students who reported experiencing financial stress were twice as likely to report experiencing mental

[1] Headspace, & National Union of Students. (2017). National tertiary student wellbeing survey 2016. Retrieved from https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/headspace-NUS-Publication-Digital.pdf

[2] Cvetkovski, S., Reavley, N. J., & Jorm, A. F. (2012). The prevalence and correlates of psychological distress in Australian tertiary students compared to their community peers. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 46*(5), 457-467

[3] Headspace, & National Union of Students. (2017). National tertiary student wellbeing survey 2016. Retrieved from https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/headspace-NUS-Publication-Digital.pdf

[4] Australian Human Rights Commission (2017). Change the course: national report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities. Australian Human Rights Commission, Sydney, N.S.W

[5] Universities Australia. (2013). University Student Finances in 2012. Canberra: Universities Australia and Centre for the Study for Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.

[6] ibid.

[7] ibid.

illness than students who reported not experiencing financial strain[8]. The University of Melbourne Henderson Poverty Line calculation for June 2018 showed that a student living away from home receiving the maximum amount of Youth Allowance receives only 57.2% of the poverty line[9]. Not only should this figure concern the government, but it should shed light on the number of mental, physical and social problems that students experience during their study as a result of financial stress due to inadequate income support.

Inadequate financial support for students has flow-on effects which a government response with a narrow mental-health focus will not be able to rectify in isolation to its other causes. While it may be outside the scope of this review, the ongoing decline of government investment into higher education will not only continue to erode the mental and physical health of students to the detriment of their personal wellbeing, but also have a devastating effect on the productivity of the economy and the reputation to the sector if not addressed.

Prevention and Treatment Services for Students with Mental Health Issues

The NUS and Headspace survey found that there was a high level of support service use by students, with two-thirds of those sampled having accessed assistance from a mental health professional at some point[10]. On-campus mental support was found to have been utilised in the last 12 months by 27% of young adults and 32% of mature adults[11]. High usage rates by student populations demand a properly resourced on-campus counselling service or at least an adequate number of external Medicare covered appointments with a mental health care expert.

A 2013 counselling services benchmarking survey identified that the majority of Australian university counselling services felt that their professional staff to student ratio was not sufficient to meet core service delivery[12]. A reduced capacity for service means that wait times for appointments can extend beyond 10 days, with 63.6% of services indicating that they could not satisfy all requests for counselling within a two-week period year round[13]. These delays potentially endanger students who are seeking urgent/emergency assistance. It was also noted that over 65% of services do not provide a service delivery model which caters to part-time students who frequently attend classes outside standard business hours[14]. This points to a specific need for resources to be directed onto university campuses where a significant number of students seek support and assistance with their mental health issues.

In 2015, the US-based RAND Corporation published a paper outlining the economic benefits of early intervention and treatment of mental health issues in students to arrive at a cost savings of $56 million per year[15]. Government involvement in both the facilitation of mental health prevention and intervention strategies can have long-term impacts on both the

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[8] Stallman, H. M. 2008. Prevalence of psychological distress in university students--implications for service delivery. *Aust Fam Physician*, 37, 673-7.

[9] University of Melbourne, 2018, Poverty Lines: Australia: June Quarter 2018, sourced from NUS Submission to Pre-Budget 2019-2020 (2019). National Union of Students.

[10] Headspace, & National Union of Students. (2017). National tertiary student wellbeing survey 2016. Retrieved from https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/headspace-NUS-Publication-Digital.pdf

[11] Ibid.

[12] Basu, S. (2016) Expectations and Experiences of Indian Students in Australia: Findings from a Survey and Focus Group Study. *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 47, 1-17.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Eisenberg, D., Hunt, J., Speer, N. & Zivin, K. (2011). Mental health service utilization among college students in the United States. J Nerv Ment Dis, 199, 301-8, sourced from Orygen (2017). Under the radar: The mental health of Australian university students. Melbourne: Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health.

educational attainment of students in Australia and also save the economy millions in public health spending. Interventions such as awareness raising have been found to be effective in improving the willingness of students to seek help[16].

Consequences of Poor Mental Health Status for Students

In failing to adequately provide services to students experiencing mental health issues, there exists an increased likelihood that students will be unable to complete their studies. A lack of response to mental health difficulties can result in poor academic performance or complete academic failure, relationship issues, and compounding problems such as drug or alcohol abuse, stigma, isolation, discrimination and the continued decline of physical and mental health[17]. Failure to progress in post-secondary education will likely impact future employment prospects, earning potential, and may reduce the likelihood that these students pursue other educational pathways in the future. Many students will also be in debt as a result of undertaking a HELP loan defer the costs of their education which may further exacerbate the stress associated with dropping out of university. When all these compounding issues are considered, without proper intervention and support in place, the potential cost of the decline to a student's personal and mental wellbeing is significant.

Recommendations

Education is now Australia's third biggest export sector and the country's leading service export industry overall, generating $32.2 billion for the economy[18]. At the same time, government intervention into the mental health status of post-secondary students has largely been ignored. For example, the Australian Government's $52.6 million National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program only provides mental health programs for early childhood centers, primary and secondary schools[19]. As a result, there is a significant gap in service provision for students during a period in their lives where the onset of mental illness becomes a more serious risk[20].

Broadly, the Curtin Student Guild offers a number of recommendations that may improve mental health services to assist tertiary students in the prevention, treatment, and management of mental health issues to ensure that they are able continue to progress through their academic career without significant mental health barriers:

- A best practice model for universities to establish benchmarks to respond to all matters related to student mental health with specific considerations for sub-groups of students (regional, international, low SES, Indigenous). This best practice model will be guided by mental health organisations in consultation with student leaders.

[16] Reavley, N. J., McCann, T. V., Cvetkovski, S. & Jorm, A. F. 2014. A multifaceted intervention to improve mental health literacy in students of a multicampus university: a cluster randomised trial. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol*, 49, 1655-66.

[17] Orman, J. (2017). Mental Health on Campus – Practical Ways to Help. PowerPoint presented at the Inaugural Australasian Mental Health and Higher Education Conference Townsville, Qld, Australia, sourced from Carter, M. A., Pagliano, P., Francis, A., & Thorne, M. (2017). Australian university students and mental health: Viewpoints from the literature. International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change, 3(3), 1–25. Retrieved from http://www.ijicc.net/images/Spec_ed_Dec_2017/1CarterPaglianoFrancisThorne.pdf

[18] Australia's international education exports grew by 22% in 2017 (2018, April). ICEF Monitor. Retrieved from http://monitor.icef.com/2018/04/australias-international-education-exports-grew-22-2017

[19] Hunt, G. (2017). $73 million to support the mental health of Australian children. [Press Release] Retrieved from http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/699F3C3324F4C0C5CA25813900063E3A/$File/GH057.pdf

[20] Cvetkovski, S., Reavley, N. J., & Jorm, A. F. (2012). The prevalence and correlates of psychological distress in Australian tertiary students compared to their community peers. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 46*(5), 457-467.

- An improved collaboration between university campuses and external service providers who can assist students in specialised areas which are outside the scope of university counselling services.
- An increase in the total number of Medicare supported sessions with a mental health expert per year. At a current total of 10, some students may miss out on the long-term support required for more serious mental health conditions. While many students may never utilise this service, those who do may require more consistent and ongoing management of severe mental health issues.
- An increase in funding to Australian university counselling services, with the aim of increasing numbers of professional staff to meet the demands of a student population who are demonstrating an increasing complexity and severity of mental health conditions.
- An improvement in mental health data collection to track the number of students accessing mental health services at universities and the rate at which these students abandon their studies due to reasons related to their mental wellbeing.
- An increase in mental health promotion campaigns and awareness raising strategies to direct students to resources and online interventions that are accessible through university channels targeted to their needs, schedules, and preferences[21] (i.e. part-time, online students, regional students, etc.).

Conclusion

The Curtin Student Guild's view is that mental health plays a significant role in determining whether students are successful in their studies and able to enjoy their time at university. Mounting pressures on students concerning their mental health and wellbeing will often be the deciding factor in whether students start or progress throughout their academic career. The government can play significant role in improving the standard of living for students, and in turn, increasing their mental health and wellbeing. It would be short-sighted to suggest that a mental-health strategy could address all of the underlying causes of mental health issues that students experience as a result of undertaking post-secondary education. The prevention, treatment, and management of mental health issues for students requires more than a simple suggestion to increase Medicare appointments can provide. Students need affordable housing, increased income support, better funding for education, less debt after university, improved employment outcomes, lower repayment thresholds, and accessible and fair access to education.

Until the government decides that students are worth more to their communities, the economy, and the prosperity of the nation, the prevalence of mental health issues amongst students will continue to limit their academic success and stifle their potential.

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[21] Cvetkovski, S., Reavley, N. J., & Jorm, A. F. (2012). The prevalence and correlates of psychological distress in Australian tertiary students compared to their community peers. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 46*(5), 457-467.