GUIDE FOR ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Overview

This guide has been developed as part of the Best Practice International Student Engagement project, funded by the Australian Government through the International Education Innovation Fund (IEIF).

The core aim of this project is to develop a series of guides and resources to enhance international student engagement.

The evidence-based guides and resources have been developed through:

- Desktop analysis of existing literature and examples of innovative practice.

- Three surveys, capturing over 6,000 responses from international students, graduates, education providers, government, community and professional organisations.

- 11 consultation workshops with 213 stakeholders.

- Interviews with 40 key stakeholders.

This research has identified the key themes involved in international student engagement and examples of innovative practice.

This guide is part of a series of six guides and a Guiding Framework intended to improve policies, practices, and programs to enhance international student engagement.

A complete list of the guides is below:

- Guide for enhancing international student engagement through teaching, learning and language

- Guide for enhancing international students' intercultural and community engagement

- Guide for enhancing international students' mental health and wellbeing

- Guide for enhancing international student engagement in work integrated learning and their employability

- Guide for supporting international students with accommodation

- Guide for supporting international students with crisis navigation

- A framework for developing innovative programs to enhance international student engagement.

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DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

This guide is designed to assist practitioners and staff who teach, work with and support international students across all education sectors, professional organisations, government and non-government organisations, and local communities.

The mental health and wellbeing of international students has been a long-standing concern for Australia, its educational institutions, families, and the students themselves. Measures designed to address the issues of mental health and wellbeing can go a long way to enhance the overall student experience in Australia.

Education institutions can support students' mental health and wellbeing and help keep students safe. Institutions should have strategies to support mental health, wellbeing, cultural and physical safety, as well as suicide prevention strategies which apply across their institution.

This guide presents principles and specific strategies that are designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of international students.

The guide has been informed by research findings from desktop analysis, consultation workshops, interviews and surveys with international students, graduates, education providers, government, community and professional organisations.

The guide also builds on the 2020 Orygen report, *International students and their mental health and physical safety,* which was funded by the Department of Education under the Enabling Growth and Innovation Program.

What do we know?

International students are at an increased risk of experiencing poor mental health because of being away from home, culture shock, language barriers, financial stress, academic pressures and other factors.

International students have been found to be less likely to seek help for mental health issues and this can impact on the severity of their mental illness[1]. The stressors which international students experience and the barriers they may face when seeking help can increase the risk of suicide. Getting timely and appropriate help for mental health issues supports better health outcomes.[2]

Education providers and community organisations play an important role in supporting international students' mental health and wellbeing.

National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018[3], Standard Six, states that education providers must support students to adjust to study and life in Australia. This includes providing information about the emergency, health and support services available to assist students with their general or personal circumstances.

1   Orygen (2020). Report on International students and their mental health and physical safety. Orygen.

2   McKay S, Veresova M, Bailey E, Lamblin M, Robinson (2023). Suicide Prevention for International Students: A Scoping Review. Int J. Environ. Res. Public Health.

3   National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018. Australian Government Department of Education.

What helps international students with their mental health and wellbeing?

■ **Affordable, visible and culturally appropriate services**

International students often feel more comfortable accessing help if health and wellbeing support services are affordable, visible and culturally appropriate.

■ **Family and peer support**

Family and student peers are key sources of wellbeing support for international students. Teachers, institutional staff and health practitioners can also provide health-related support.

■ **Positive self-perceptions of general physical health**

Many international students are young and so generally feel positive about their physical health[4]. Positive self-esteem is also a critical factor.

■ **A sense of belonging**

Feeling welcomed, connected and included often has a positive impact on international students' wellbeing[5].

■ **Partnership approach to mental health**

Facilitating access to services which support international students' mental health and wellbeing is a key responsibility of education providers. Collaboration between education providers and mental health services will support students to access the support they require.

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4 Rosenthal, D.A., et al. (2008). The health and wellbeing of international students at an Australian university. High Educ 55, 51–67; Citak, T. G., et al. (2021).

5 Blackmore, J. et al. (2023). International students in Australian schools: Longing for belonging. ARC Project Report.

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What hinders international students' mental health and wellbeing?

■ **Challenges in a new country**

The challenges associated with being away from home can include homesickness, a lack of connection with local communities, loneliness, financial stress, work pressure, accommodation insecurity, discrimination, and exposure to scams. International students' visa status as temporary residents may mean they are not eligible for government or community support programs.

■ **Financial barriers to accessing support**

Some international students may not be able to afford treatment to support their recovery, if their Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) does not provide adequate coverage.

■ **Fear of being diagnosed with mental health issues**

International students may be fearful of how their families and friends might view them if they are diagnosed with a mental health or wellbeing issue.

Students may also come from a culture where mental health is seen as a sign of weakness. They may also worry that a mental health diagnosis or wellbeing issue could affect their visa. These concerns can lead to delays in seeking help if students experience mental illness.

■ **Lack of awareness of support available**

Students may lack an understanding of available services and how to access them. This lack of understanding can extend to all services, including those provided at the institution level. International students can also be unsure of how to use their OSHC, and what it covers.

■ **Lack of linguistically and culturally appropriate health services**

International students accessing Australian health services may experience language barriers or cultural differences that prevent them from receiving appropriate care.

What can we do?

Guiding Principles

The design and delivery of programs and initiatives supporting international students' mental health and wellbeing should be underpinned by the following principles which were developed based on the research findings from desktop analysis, consultation workshops, interviews and surveys:

1. De-stigmatising mental health

2. Prevention and early intervention

3. Developing culturally appropriate services

4. Raising staff capability to support students

5. Ensuring availability and preparedness of support services

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1:

DE-STIGMATISING
MENTAL HEALTH

De-stigmatising mental health

In the last decade, discussions about mental health and wellbeing have become an increasingly normal part of everyday life in Australia. This has been paired with people feeling more comfortable to access mental health support services in times of need.

Mental health is less widely spoken about or accepted in some countries. For most people, suicidal feelings or distress and suicide are challenging topics to talk about, and for some cultures, these topics can be taboo.

More work needs to be done to reduce the stigma and help international students to feel comfortable discussing their mental health and wellbeing and disclosing if they are experiencing suicidal feelings.

The following strategies can reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and suicidal feelings and the barriers to accessing support:

- **Introducing support services and wellbeing sessions to newly-arrived students**

  Introducing students to mental health and wellbeing services at an early stage of their in-country experience may help them find these services if they need them at some point.

  Stakeholder consultation suggested introductory sessions focusing on concepts such as how to manage stress, dealing with cross-cultural misunderstandings, and where to seek support can be beneficial.

■ **Accessible, visible and culturally appropriate support services**

Support services that are accessible and welcoming while providing a culturally-safe atmosphere are more likely to be used by international students.

Embrace Multicultural Mental Health is a website which lists mental health services that specifically operate to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) individuals. It also includes mental health resources translated into a range of different languages.

Some institutions provide the Talk Campus app, offering 24/7 access to mental health support.

■ **Student-empowered approach**

It is important to empower international students to enhance their own wellbeing and that of their peers.

There are a range of ways education providers can encourage international students to take action to support their mental health. This can include creating student roles as champions of wellbeing, promoting community and student-centred initiatives, delivering stress management and resilience training and drug education, and promoting physical exercise.

■ **Increasing international students' understanding of mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention**

International students come with different levels of understanding and attitudes towards mental health which can impact on their wellbeing. Institutions could consider appropriately embedding mental health and suicide prevention awareness into the curriculum to normalise talking about mental health.

For example, presenting information about mental health within the classroom is a practical and meaningful way to reach students. In addition, education providers could partner with local communities to find ways to reduce the stigmas around mental health.

■ **Reassure students of their visa status**

International students can be reluctant to tell anyone or seek help for mental health issues or suicidal distress because they may believe that if they are diagnosed with a mental illness, their visa may be cancelled.

Education providers should reassure international students that information they provide about a mental health issue to a health professional, counsellor and the institution is confidential and not shared with others unless they agree to this information being shared.

Good practice example:

Student Confidence's Wellbeing Programs

Student Confidence provides preventative, non-clinical, fun, and engaging mental health programs, training and workshops for students, staff and teachers in education institutions.

Student Confidence's programs empower students to make better wellbeing decisions for themselves by normalising mental health, and helping students understand their role in their own wellbeing. The programs are based on contemporary research in student mental health and wellbeing and unpack complex human behaviour in simple and practical ways that are relevant to international students.

Confidence Crew

Student Confidence offers a 4, 6 or 8-week themed program to build confidence, resilience and develop the 'soft' functional skills that students need to thrive. The programs use proven student-centric, self-leadership approaches.

Outcomes include increased in-class and peer-to-peer engagement and boosted personal empowerment to confidently approach challenging situations such as finding a job, navigating a workplace, managing study stress and parent expectations, and making friends.

Piloted by Study Melbourne, Confidence Crew has supported more than 9,000 students through lockdowns and beyond.

Student Confidence have been recognised by the International Education Association of Australia as a 2021 Excellence Award winner for Innovation for its preventative wellbeing programming and events, and by Study Melbourne as finalists in the 2022 International Education Awards (Excellence in International Student Experience).

Creativity for Wellbeing

Art as Therapy sessions create a safe space for students, through a series of full and part-day creative art events, which explore themes as diverse as:

- self-awareness
- connection to self / others / place / country
- teamwork and collaboration
- innovative thinking and what it means in the workplace.

Students are encouraged to notice and express difficult and personal emotions through the medium of creativity and shared experiences.

Student Confidence's Wellbeing Programs are available online at: www.studentconfidence.com.au/.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 2:

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Prevention and early intervention

Mental health, wellbeing, and suicide prevention programs as well as early intervention strategies are key to supporting students' mental health.

Prevention programs aim to promote wellbeing and prevent mental illness from occurring. These can include stress management, relaxation and mindfulness training, meditation, yoga etc.

Early intervention prevents or reduces the progress of a mental illness. It includes specialist intervention and support to a person who is experiencing or demonstrating early symptoms of mental illness.

Early intervention services are often under-utilised by international students and education providers need to support students to access these services as soon as possible if they require them.

Suicide can impact anyone in Australia, including international students. Education institutions can support international students by looking out for possible warning signs, reaching out, talking about it and ensuring that international students are connected with appropriate support services.

General Practitioners (GPs), institutions' counselling services, headspace and other mental health services are all early intervention services which education providers can recommend to international students.

Below are some strategies around prevention and early intervention:

■ **Increasing awareness about risks to their mental health and services available**

Students should be informed about the risks of 'culture shock', stress, study demands, work pressure, isolation, financial concerns, accommodation insecurity or tenancy issues, and scams. They should also be informed of the risks and dangers of alcohol, illegal substances and/or prescribed medications which may lead to mental health issues and addiction.

Education providers should always provide information about the services on campus and within the community which can support international students if they experience mental illness or distress.

Stakeholder consultation suggested that this information could be included in pre-departure briefings and orientation programs.

■ **Looking out for signs of mental ill-health and distress**

Identifying early signs of mental health issues will help education providers and organisations to provide timely support to students at risk, including access points for suicide prevention information or training where necessary.

Signs that an international student may be struggling with mental health include[6]:

- feeling anxious or worried
- feeling depressed or unhappy
- emotional outbursts (e.g. crying excessively, excessive response to small incidents)
- sleep problems
- weight or appetite changes
- quiet or withdrawn (e.g. disengagement with friends and family)
- substance abuse
- feeling guilty or worthless
- significant drop in academic performance
- not attending class
- discontinuation of previously appreciated activities
- frequent mood swings
- lack of energy or motivation
- odd or unusual thought processes in written or oral classwork.

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6   Health Direct. Nine signs of mental health issues; Fernando, RPF. Mental health and international students: Learn about the signs of mental illness and where to get support. Study Melbourne; English Australia (2018). Guide to best practice in international student mental health.

■ Developing prevention strategies

Education providers could seek resources from, and work with, mental health organisations and providers in the development of a mental ill-health and suicide prevention strategy for international students.

Organisations such as Primary Health Networks, Embrace Multicultural Mental Health, Lifeline, Black Dog Institute, Head to Health and Orygen could support education providers to develop mental ill-health prevention strategies or identify support services for international students in their region.

■ Seeking help early

Encouraging international students to seek help early is vital to support their wellbeing. Lack of knowledge regarding mental health and available support services are barriers to international students accessing help.

Information to improve international students' understanding of mental health and how they can get support should be communicated during pre-departure, orientation and regularly throughout the study year.

■ Providing clear information about health insurance and the healthcare system

Students are often unclear about their OSHC and what it includes. They may also lack an understanding of how the healthcare system operates in Australia. For example, a GP referral is required to access specialist care.

Education providers should provide information early on to international students about the different OSHC options to help them be well informed when selecting health coverage.

If education providers receive feedback from international students that they are unable to access mental health treatment, they could provide feedback to OSHC providers.

■ Providing clear information around confidentiality and duty of care

International students may hesitate to seek help due to concerns about the impacts of doing so on their study and visas. Support staff should assure students that information shared during counselling sessions is confidential and will not be shared with their institution or other organisations, and will not impact their academic transcripts or visas.

■ **Sharing accurate information and coordinating support services**

Information about mental health and wellbeing support is often provided on an ad-hoc basis. Education providers should provide a designated staff member who can be a point of contact for international students to seek reliable information about support services they can access on campus and within their local community.

■ **Connecting with health services outside education institutions**

The coordination between education providers and external health services is crucial in helping students who face circumstances beyond the scope and expertise of what the education system can provide.

Medical and counselling services are available from many education providers, but they are not designed to replace existing external health services. This means it is important that links are established between educational institutions and external support services for situations where students require more specialised help and support.

GPs are a good point of contact for international students who want health advice. Connections with GP clinics, especially ones which have multilingual staff, can be very useful when providing support to international students.

headspace offers mental health support services, including online and phone support, for young Australians and international students. Interpreter services are available to support international students who access headspace.

If there is a headspace service within the local community, education providers should contact them to confirm that international students are able to access their services.

■ Suicide prevention

International students are less likely to seek help for mental health-related struggles compared to domestic students. Furthermore, investigations into international student death by suicide reveal low engagement with mental health services prior to their death[7].

Ensuring people experiencing distress can quickly access the help they need is vital in preventing deaths by suicide. Some suicides occur without any obvious signals, but often there are warning signs. It is important to understand what the warning signs are and look out for them.

Talking to someone who has suicidal thoughts can help reduce stigma and help them reach out for support. Encouraging these kinds of conversations is a powerful tool to reduce the fear and silence surrounding suicide and ultimately prevent deaths by suicide[8].

Suicide prevention training and education within education institutions provides an opportunity for promotion, prevention, and early intervention. It is essential that suicide prevention initiatives within education settings focus on reducing the stigma of suicidal thoughts and behaviour. Suicide prevention programs that are

targeted to a priority population have demonstrated a reduction in deaths by suicide[9].

There are a range of resources which can support education providers to develop staff capabilities in this area including:

- an e-learning package developed by Universities Australia and Suicide Prevention Australia to support the uptake of suicide prevention literacy and skills within universities across Australia. The e-learning package is designed for staff but also suitable for students and includes information about warning signs. It contains four modules which complement and support the implementation of Suicide Prevention: A Competency Framework for Universities.

- Suicide Prevention Response resources offered by Be You provide clear, practical and reliable guidance and support to help schools in suicide prevention. Be You is the national mental health in education initiative delivered by Beyond Blue, in collaboration with Early Childhood Australia and headspace.

9 ibid.

7 Veresova M, Lamblin M, Robinson J, McKay S (2024). A systematic review and narrative synthesis of prevalence rates, risk and protective factors for suicidal behaviour in international students. Frontiers in Psychiatry.

8 Universities Australia and Suicide Prevention Australia (2022). Suicide Prevention: A competency framework for universities. Universities Australia.

Introduction

De-stigmatising
mental health

Early intervention
and prevention

Culturally
appropriate
services

Raising staff
capability

Availability and
preparedness

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Good practice example:

SAIBT & CELUSA mental health early intervention

SAIBT & CELUSA is an Adelaide-based Navitas college which has provided the Mental Health First Aid Training in the workplace program to staff since 2019, in line with the Navitas Student Mental Health Framework. This early intervention training aims to develop the mental health first aid skills for staff who work directly to support international students at the college.

Staff members are trained to identify early signs of mental health issues and implement a wide range of activities and strategies to support students. For example, staff can submit Student of Concern forms for intervention to happen.

In addition, through the Low Attendance Management project, Student Leaders are involved in contacting their peers who have not been attending classes. In both cases, staff or peers offer or refer students to relevant support. As such, Student Leaders are also provided with opportunities to develop leadership skills and workplace experience.

These are two examples of SAIBT & CELUSA early intervention efforts. Evidence shows that there is an improvement in student attendance and engagement in the student community after being contacted by teachers and peers.

Staff feedback is collected through Mental Health First Aid, Australia, and can be accessed if required. Student Leaders also complete a survey about their knowledge on sexual assault and sexual harassment resources and how to report any incident via the college website.

Good practice example:

A counsellor from the Western Sydney University (WSU) Counselling Service provides ongoing relaxation sessions for the whole cohort of international students at the College at WSU as part of the university's prevention approach.

Two sessions are run for international students during their 10-week terms. The initial session introduces students to basic relaxation strategies and the second introduces them to a deeper relaxation session. These are compulsory sessions in the first few weeks and then the last week of study.

The first session introduces the practice of relaxation, its benefits for mental health, wellbeing and in managing academic pressure. It also introduces students to a range of relaxation sessions available on the WSU website under counselling services, as well as the services provided by the University Counselling Service both in the form of appointments or drop-in services.

The second session is provided closer to the exam period to remind students of the benefits of a relaxed mind for their mental health, concentration, and for improving their memory. These sessions are provided either in person or on Zoom and are attended by all classes.

There has been positive feedback from international students on the personal benefits of these sessions.

WSU relaxation sessions are available online at: www.westernsydney.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/services_ and_facilities/counselling_services/stress_and_your_wellbeing/relaxation_ recordings.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 3:

DEVELOPING CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SERVICES

Developing culturally appropriate services

Students are more likely to access services which feel culturally safe.

The following strategies offer ideas on how to present a culturally safe environment for international students that will support their mental health and wellbeing:

■ **Being culturally responsive to international student needs**

International students generally feel more understood and welcome when support services align with their cultural identity.

To improve the cultural responsiveness of support programs, education providers and organisations could consider:

- encouraging culturally-responsive practice training for staff so that international students can access culturally appropriate care.

- asking students what would make them feel comfortable and culturally safe and respected.

- developing culturally-relevant activities such as storytelling, the arts, or music.

- employing culturally sensitive attitudes that show respect to the beliefs and values of students while addressing their mental health needs.

- helping international students to access interpreting services. The Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National has a phone interpreting service which is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year by calling 131 450. The service is available to any individual or organisation in Australia.

- including international students in the development and implementation of support services, for example, at the individual level during care planning, and at the broader level through advisory groups.

The Framework for Mental Health Delivery in Multicultural Australia is a free, online resource which helps individuals or services to evaluate and enhance their cultural responsiveness.

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- **Ensuring cultural representation among staff to ensure they understand the specific challenges faced by international students**

  Some cultures and countries do not have the same views of mental health issues as Australia.

  Education providers and organisations could connect international students with staff members from the same or similar national and cultural backgrounds who are familiar with Western interpretations of mental health. These staff should have training in mental health and knowledge of mental health services available. This would encourage international students to feel more culturally safe in sharing their wellbeing issues and to seek help.

- **Online and physical cultural networks**

  In person and online networks could be designed to provide support for people from specific cultural backgrounds. These could specialise in providing support to particular international student population groups experiencing mental health issues.

  For example, both the Indonesian International Student Community in Adelaide and the Vietnamese International Student Association in Darwin have online forums that provide significant support to Indonesian and Vietnamese students, including their mental health and wellbeing.

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■ **Peer support**

International students often turn to their peers when seeking help.

Establishing international student mentor initiatives or programs where first year international students are paired up with international students who have been in Australia longer, can increase their understanding of mental health and the services which can support them in a culturally safe way. To increase engagement, these programs should include other activities such as friend speed dating or games or trips which are more likely to draw students who may not feel comfortable engaging with a mental health program.

Education providers could consider organising weekly peer group meetings moderated by a staff member trained in mental health and suicide prevention.

Videos featuring international students discussing their experiences of suicidal feelings and their journey to recovery are available on the Orygen website, and can help normalise discussions about mental health and suicide among international students.

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Introduction

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Early intervention and prevention

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Raising staff capability

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Good practice example:

ActivateUNSW

ActivateUNSW at the University of New South Wales is a peer-to-peer support program for new international and domestic students with disabilities, long term health or mental health conditions.

International students are matched with a senior student mentor who has lived experience as an international student in Australia and can guide, support and encourage help-seeking behaviours to enable their fellow students to get the most out of university life and studies.

This program provides a confidential safe space to discuss the transition to university life, where to seek support, accessible campus tours and more. Students do not need to be registered with UNSW support services to join this program.

Senior student mentors provide one-on-one mentoring, online sessions, or casual group sessions. All sessions are confidential and designed to fit in with a student's schedule. This program also aims to ensure students can balance academic study with fun social interactions. The program organises casual meet ups and after class social experiences.

Data is captured to ensure the program is meeting an identified need. Survey results indicate that new students find the program a safe space to share their personal circumstances. Students appreciate being connected with a peer who understands their personal challenges.

ActivateUNSW is available online at: www.student.unsw.edu.au/cocurricular/activateunsw.

Good practice example:

International Student Mental Health Peer Work Program

The International Student Mental Health Peer Work program is a peer support initiative at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Melbourne Polytechnic that is supported by Orygen. International students with a lived experience of mental ill-health are employed and trained to support international students with their mental health challenges and provide an experiential perspective to navigating mental health and wellbeing services within the education provider and the community.

The International Student Mental Health Peer Work program was designed to address the need for Student Mental Health and Wellbeing teams to engage with international students who have historically underutilised these services. The program aims to reduce the barriers for students to receiving support and provide a relatable, culturally-responsive, and accessible means of exploring their experiences with mental ill-health.

International students who are employed into student wellbeing teams as part of this program are trained and receive supervision from Orygen. The peer work training package was developed by Orygen in collaboration with peer workers, education providers, education provider staff members, and international students. This training focuses on culturally responsive peer support that recognises how a person's culture may influence their understanding of mental health and wellbeing.

International Student Mental Health Peer Workers provide one-on-one peer support and run informative group sessions exploring mental health, wellbeing, and inclusion within the community. The sessions are confidential and can be one-off or ongoing. The embedding of these roles within student support and wellbeing teams means that students can be supported to seek additional support if required. The peer workers also organise social meet ups to encourage students to create their own peer networks within the campus and in their communities.

Students who participated in the program felt a stronger sense of belonging within the education provider, increased their awareness of available mental health supports, and were more likely to seek professional support if they needed it.

Information on the International Student Mental Health Peer Work Program is available online at:
www.orygen.org.au/About/Employment-and-education-partnerships/Our-projects/Current-projects

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 4:

RAISING STAFF CAPABILITY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

Raising staff capability

Teachers and support staff play a key role in enhancing international students' mental health and wellbeing, and supporting students experiencing suicidal distress to be safe, and access the services and treatment they need.

The following strategies could increase staff capability of how to support international students' mental health and wellbeing:

■ **Increased understanding of the multiple factors that affect international students' mental health**

Education providers and organisations could consider raising staff awareness of the factors that impact international student wellbeing. These include:

- homesickness
- 'culture shock' (i.e. the feeling of being out of place in a new country)
- study demands
- work pressure
- financial stress during study
- discrimination or workplace/accommodation exploitation
- scams
- accommodation or tenancy issues
- drug and alcohol abuse or addiction.

Staff awareness of these issues could be increased through briefings that outline the impact of these factors on international students, or in sessions where students can share their experiences.

■ **Understanding and acting on potential indicators of mental distress**

Education providers could adopt a strategy where staff are trained to monitor signals which can indicate students are not doing well and reach out to these students to see if they are ok, and if there is any way that education provider can support them.

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■ **Understanding that gender differences, sexuality and cultural norms may affect attitudes towards mental health and self-care**

International students may come from cultures where mental health is not widely recognised, is stigmatised, or simply not discussed. They may not understand the role of mental health support services or how these services can assist in addressing their own mental health concerns.

Education providers and organisations could consider organising "listening" sessions to improve staff understanding of the diverse mental health needs of international students across cultural, gender and sexuality groups. These could help staff tackle misconceptions and stereotypes about international students.

■ **Understanding the fear associated with a mental health diagnosis**

Staff professional development programs should include information about fears and concerns international students may hold to enhance staff understanding and capability.

Professional development programs could provide staff with advice on how to respond in a way that is supportive of the students' mental health, make adjustments where appropriate and encourage students to seek help.

■ **Understanding the stigma around obtaining support and accessing counselling services**

It is important for staff to be aware that international students may not adequately understand the importance of mental health. International students may also feel unsure about the services available to them or be uncomfortable seeking help.

Information about the stigma that may prevent international students seeking help should be included in training programs for staff dealing with international students.

■ **Understanding students' help-seeking behaviour**

International students often seek help in different ways to domestic students. Many feel that their mental health issues are a threat to their ability to continue studying in Australia and something they must resolve on their own. This impacts on them accessing support services. International students often do not access support services, but often turn to their peers for advice and support.

Education providers should increase their understanding and awareness of international students' mental health, and help international students get timely support. Staff should have an understanding of the ways international students may experience and respond to mental distress and the ways international students seek help. This could be achieved through formal training, or regular staff meetings focused on these issues.

■ **Organising targeted professional development**

Education providers could organise tailored professional development to train all staff about mental health and what to do if students report issues to them or if they begin displaying worrying symptoms or change in behaviour.

This could include mental health first aid training for staff working with international students. This can help staff understand student needs, identify which students are struggling with their mental health and offer assistance proactively rather than waiting for students to seek help after a problem has occurred.

headspace's University Support Program provides training and education opportunities to Australian universities to build their capacity and confidence to engage in conversations about mental health and wellbeing.

Mental Health First Aid training helps staff gain more knowledge, skills, and confidence to assist students who may be experiencing a mental health illness or are experiencing a mental health crisis.

There is also training to support staff in recognising the signs of suicide risk and intervene to direct students towards supports, for example, LivingWorks Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST).

■ **Enhancing staff cultural capability**

Staff working with international students should undertake cultural competency training to support them to effectively engage with international students and other students from diverse backgrounds.

■ **Evaluating mental health support programs**

It is important that education providers and organisations evaluate support programs regularly to collect evidence of what does and does not work for international students.

Evaluations could be conducted by collecting feedback from students and staff engaged in the program. In these evaluations, international students should be asked if they feel comfortable accessing these services.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 5:

ENSURING AVAILABILITY AND PREPAREDNESS OF SUPPORT SERVICES

Ensuring availability and preparedness of support services

International students can experience changing cultural, political, socio-economic and personal circumstances throughout their stay in Australia.

It is important that cultural support services are readily available and easily accessible to support international students during their stay in Australia and assist them in adjusting to the unfamiliar cultural anomalies they may experience.

The following strategies can be adopted to support international students while studying and living in Australia:

■ **Pre-departure preparation is beneficial for both students and their families**

International student engagement begins before students have left their home country.

Education providers should inform international students and their families of what to expect upon arrival in Australia to support positive mental health and wellbeing. They should also provide information about available support services, including mental health services.

■ **Organising targeted orientation materials**

Orientation provides useful information, but it can risk overwhelming students. Research suggests that many students do not read all the information available to them. Education providers should be creative in providing targeted orientation materials to international students and promote information about mental health and support services to international students on an ongoing basis.

Institutions could consider providing an online handbook and QR code, or a mobile app such as the ANUOK App by The Australian National University.

The DeakinWELLBEING App also aims to enhance students' wellbeing and promote a healthy lifestyle.

■ **Improving digital literacy for international students**

International students' ability to use digital tools, including apps, for navigating support services, may vary due to their levels of digital literacy.

Education providers could consider organising digital literacy for support navigation sessions at institutional, faculty or campus levels to provide international students with guidance.

■ **Leveraging social media platforms**

Young people are increasingly engaging with social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. These are among the most popular and rapidly growing online platforms used by youth.

Education providers could work with related organisations to leverage these platforms to promote accurate and updated information about mental health and support services in creative ways.

■ **Leveraging existing support services**

There are a range of services to support people with their mental health in Australia including headspace, Head to Health, Mindspot, ReachOut, This Way Up, BITEBACK, Beyond Blue and Lifeline. International students can access these services.

Services which are designed for CALD groups can be particularly appropriate for international students.

Embrace Multicultural Mental Health provides a national focus on mental health and suicide prevention for people from CALD backgrounds. It provides a national platform for Australian mental health services and multicultural communities to access resources, link to services and find information in a culturally-accessible format.

Some states have services which support people from CALD backgrounds to access mental health services such as the NSW, Victorian and Queensland transcultural mental health centres.

Education providers should have a strong understanding of what services are available within their local community and how international students can access these. This will promote better health outcomes for international students.

Good practice example:

'ihear u' wellbeing program

ihear u is a wellbeing program developed by International House (IH), an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) and vocational education provider based in Sydney, Melbourne, Darwin, the Gold Coast, Byron Bay and Adelaide.

ihear u has been designed to support students and give them the opportunity to talk to someone who can provide them with support and tools to enhance their understanding of mental health and ultimately thrive.

The focus of ihear u is to build awareness of mental health, create a safe space for students to talk about mental health, and encourage students and staff to seek help.

Students are eligible for four one-on-one sessions with a registered counsellor who works at IH, where they can talk about their concerns and issues safely and without judgement. Students can contact the 'ihear u' service or ask their teachers, trainers, or student services to contact the service on their behalf.

Students connect with the program through various channels including workshops, webinars, group discussions, and in-class activities, such as practising meditation and mindfulness. The topics and strategies implemented are based around issues known to affect international students including homesickness, emotional intelligence, and anxiety. Social media has also been a successful channel for conversation with students.

Since the beginning of the program, more than one hundred students have reached out for help. The counsellors meet regularly to assess cases and review student feedback to ensure the program is meeting the students' needs.

IH ihear u is available online at: ihsydney.com.au/student-resources/wellbeing-ihear-u/.

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY

Examine a mental health and wellbeing support program for international students that you are involved in designing and/or delivering and ask yourself and your colleagues the following questions:

- What factors do we need to consider to ensure our health services are culturally sensitive to international students from diverse backgrounds? Are our services designed and delivered largely from an Australian perspective?

- What resources can we mobilise to develop collaboration between teachers, counsellors and international student support practitioners to help them embed information about mental health in the classroom?

- How can we establish and sustain effective partnerships with community, migrant or refugee support organisations and leverage these services to provide coordinated support for international student mental health and wellbeing?

- What mechanisms can we adopt to assess the effectiveness of the activities and programs we have designed to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of international students?

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Glossary

■ Cultural safety[10]

Cultural safety is about the experience of the individual. It is an outcome based on respectful engagement that recognises and strives to address power imbalances inherent in society. It results in an environment free of racism and discrimination, where people feel safe and able to be themselves when receiving advice and support.

■ Mental health[11]

Mental health is a state of wellbeing that enables you to deal with what life throws at you. It is about feeling resilient, enjoying life and being able to connect with others. Good mental health helps you:

- cope with the normal stresses of life
- be productive both at work and in your private life
- relate well to other people
- contribute to your community.

■ Mental illness[12]

A mental illness is a disorder diagnosed by a medical professional that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities.

Examples include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and eating disorders. These can all occur with varying degrees of severity.

People may also experience periods of reduced mental health, or mental ill-health during their lives. During these periods they may experience some symptoms of mental illness without receiving a diagnosis. It is important to still seek support in these times.

■ Suicide[13]

Suicide is defined as death caused by self-directed injurious behaviour with intent to die as result of the behaviour[14].

Suicide is a complex issue, affected by a wide variety of factors. Although mental ill-health is often a contributing factor, not everyone who dies by suicide will have been experiencing mental ill-health.

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10 BC First Nations Health Authority (2016). "Creating A Climate for Change – Cultural Safety and Humility in Health Services for First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples in British Columbia. British Columbia Ministry of Health.

11 Department of Health and Aged Care (2022). About Mental Health. Australian Government.

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12 Everymind (2024). Understanding mental ill-health. Everymind.

13 Department of Health and Aged Care (2022). About Mental Health. Australian Government.

14 https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide

Suicide deaths have been associated with life stressors, such as social isolation, relationship breakdown and financial hardship. Suicide has an enormous impact on families, friends and communities. It is critical people who are at risk of suicide get the support they need.

■ Suicidal ideation[15]

The term 'suicidal ideation' refers to thoughts that life is not worth living, ranging in intensity from fleeting thoughts through to concrete, well thought-out plans for ending one's life, or a complete preoccupation with self-destruction. These thoughts are experienced by many young people at some point in their lives.

■ Wellbeing[16]

Wellbeing encompasses the health of the whole person – physical, mental, social and emotional. A person's wellbeing can change moment to moment, day to day, month to month and year to year. It can be influenced by what's happening in a specific moment and the actions that people take.

Wellbeing may be preferred terminology when communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse audiences.

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15 headspace (2009). Mythbuster: Suicidal Ideation. Orygen Health Research Centre.

16 Mindframe (2024). Our words matter: Glossary of terms. Mindframe.

Resources

Here are some services and resources that have a tailored approach to supporting international students:

- **Beyond Blue** is one of Australia's most trusted mental health support services. Students can talk or chat online with a counsellor.

- **Lifeline** offers online and phone support. A free interpreting service for people who do not speak English is also available. To access this service:

  - ▶ Call TIS on 131 450 and ask to talk to Lifeline on 13 11 14 in the language required.

  - ▶ TIS will call 13 11 14 on behalf of the caller.

- Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 provides a phone counselling service for young people up to age 25.

- **Mental Health Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team** in your state/territory.

- **MindSpot** provides information about mental health, online assessments, and online treatment to adults with anxiety, stress, depression or chronic pain.

- **headspace** has many services available including support for work and study. It also has an **"about" page translated into 21 languages**.

- Embrace Multicultural Mental Health provides **multilingual information about mental health**.

- **Head to Health** supports culturally and linguistically diverse people.

- **Department of Health and Aged Care provides strategies, plans, programs and research** to help prevent suicide in Australia.

- **The Study Melbourne Inclusion Program** provides funding for education providers and organisations to develop and deliver activities that promote international student wellbeing and enhance student experience in Victoria.

- More resources and programs supporting international students' mental health and wellbeing are available via the Virtual Map. The Virtual Map is available at https://www.isengagement.org/virtual-map.

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