



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

BUILDING A WELLBEING SUPPORTING COMMUNITY:

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE STUDENT
WELLBEING & MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

OVERVIEW





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Photographs in this document by Gregory Lorenzutti

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

‘To make wellbeing everyone’s business, we need to treat wellbeing as core business.’¹

The University of Melbourne is committed to supporting student wellbeing and mental health in a community that is inclusive and celebrates diversity. This *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* aims to build a wellbeing supporting community that enhances the University’s academic mission, providing an environment where students can thrive and experience success, and promoting the positive wellbeing and mental health of our community members.

The Framework has been developed in line with the Federal Government’s recommendation that all universities implement an institution-wide mental health strategy, including consideration of the impact of COVID-19 on student wellbeing². This recommendation arose from increasing reports of high rates of mental illness affecting tertiary students around the globe, including national data of at least one in four students experiencing mental ill-health in any given year³, and a decline in wellbeing across the student journey that did not return to baseline after graduation⁴.

The Framework is built upon a strong evidence base, involving a review of current research and best practice accompanied by extensive consultation with our academic experts, students and staff. The best practice review identified key themes that commonly form part of institution-wide strategies for student wellbeing and mental health across the international higher education sector. These include (i) increasing psychological literacy to develop a university community and culture that is supportive of wellbeing and mental health, (ii) having clear leadership and alignment of policy and practice to ensure a ‘whole-of-university’ approach, (iii) creating wellbeing supporting learning environments within and outside the classroom, (iv) ensuring resources and services are accessible,

meet the needs of vulnerable cohorts and reduce barriers such as perceived stigma, and (v) developing the knowledge and skills of students and staff to empower them to care for their own wellbeing and mental health.

Data gained from our broad consultation with the University community was derived from many sources to ensure our Framework is well-suited to the diverse needs of our community. This included surveys sampling the views of more than 20,000 students between 2013-2021^{5,6,7,8}, accompanied by in-depth staff and student focus groups, 1:1 consultations, workshops with expert advisory groups, presentations from student groups, and a mapping of wellbeing and mental health activities, programs and resources offered across the University (2019-2021). The findings identified core challenges currently facing the University that clearly align with the themes from the best practice review, including a pressing need to:

- (i) increase student knowledge and skills in wellbeing and mental health to support their ability to thrive and achieve their aspirations for university life
- (ii) create wellbeing-supporting learning environments to ensure programs are delivered in ways that optimise social connection and belonging, and remove practices that may increase symptoms of student mental illness
- (iii) reduce barriers to accessing mental health services by addressing stigma surrounding mental illness and taking greater account of intersectional factors that heighten these barriers.

1 Brooker, A., & Woodyatt, L. 2019 Special Issue: Psychological Wellbeing and Distress in Higher Education (*Student Success*, 2019, v.10 i.3, p.iii)

2 Aust Gov Department of Education and Training, *Final Report – Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*, 2017

3 Orygen, *Under the radar. The mental health of Australian university students*, 2017

4 Brooker, *Psychological Wellbeing and Distress in Higher Education*, 2019

5 Sancil L. et al., *Towards a Health Promoting University* (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, 2020)

6 Larcombe W. & Baik C., *Student Wellbeing and Course Experience Survey 2013* (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, 2013)

7 Larcombe W. & Baik C., *Student Wellbeing and Course Experience Survey 2017* (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne 2017)

8 Larcombe W. & Baik C., *Student Wellbeing and University Experience Survey 2021* (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne 2021)

Combining the findings of the best practice review and the identified core challenges, four goals are proposed to guide the University's approach to student wellbeing and mental health. These goals underpin the Framework:

1. Empower students and staff to proactively care for their physical, social, and emotional wellbeing.
2. Develop and strengthen curricula and co-curricular opportunities that promote student wellbeing and increase connection and belonging.
3. Align and enhance resourcing and support for activities, programs, and services for student wellbeing and mental health currently in place across the University.
4. Share a University-wide, leadership endorsed vision for wellbeing and mental health with our community of students and staff to promote the growth of a wellbeing supporting community.

To achieve these goals, the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* has been structured around three key pillars:

1. create a **Teaching and Learning Experience** that promotes positive wellbeing where students can thrive;
2. enhance student and staff wellbeing and mental health **Knowledge and Skills**; and
3. deliver **Personalised Care** that is attuned to the impact of intersectional factors.

The *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* sits within a broader health context for our University community, where promoting positive wellbeing for students is underpinned by maintaining good physical health and exercise, food security, living conditions conducive to learning, spirituality, participation in sport, the arts and music, and student clubs and societies. It recognises the core role of a sense of belonging and social connection for a successful student experience, which protect against psychological distress and the development of mental illness. These aspects of wellbeing have been challenged by the pandemic and remote learning during 2020-2021 and form part of campus life plans for 2022 and beyond, requiring our heightened attention and effort in the wake of the pandemic.

Through implementation of activities aligned with the three pillars of Teaching and Learning Experience, Knowledge and Skills and Personalised Care, a cohesive, wellbeing supporting community will grow to facilitate positive physical, social, and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes for students. Adopting this University-wide, leadership endorsed approach will ensure the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* applies to all our activities, in and outside the classroom, and supports all our student cohorts and those studying on all our campuses. Inherent within this is aligning the Framework with the strategic priorities of the University, including the new Advancing Student and Education Strategy, the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, the Indigenous Strategy and Indigenous Student Plan, and the 2030 Sustainability Plan. This will enable a more integrated and holistic approach to the student experience that supports their ability to thrive and achieve their aspirations for University life, promotes their sense of connection and belonging to our University community, and reduces barriers to accessing tailored wellbeing and mental health supports.

The final section of this document outlines eight recommendations for the University. These were informed by the student and staff consultation findings and the mapping of the initiatives and activities we have already undertaken to support the wellbeing and mental health of our students. The recommendations flow from the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* and directly respond to the core challenges currently facing the University.

You can read further details regarding the Framework's development, background and process in the [full Framework document](#).

Prof Sarah Wilson, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Life)
Caitlin Ryan, Policy and Strategy Advisor, Office of the Provost

STUDENT WELLBEING & MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

Four overarching goals guide the University's approach to student wellbeing and mental health, providing a foundation for the *Student Wellbeing and Mental Health Framework*. These goals are:

- GOAL 1:** Empower students to proactively care for their physical, social, and emotional wellbeing.
- GOAL 2:** Develop and strengthen curricula and co-curricular opportunities that promote student wellbeing and increase connection and belonging.
- GOAL 3:** Align, enhance and adequately support activities, programs, and services for student wellbeing and mental health across the University.
- GOAL 4:** Share a university-wide, leadership endorsed vision for wellbeing and mental health with our community of students and staff to promote the growth of a wellbeing supporting community.

The Framework (Figure 1) provides a way for the University to organise its approach to supporting students in their development of the skills they need to thrive and flourish at Melbourne, while also mitigating risks to their mental health.

The Framework will be used to support the growth of a cohesive, wellbeing supporting community through existing programs and the implementation of new programs and activities to facilitate positive physical, social, and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes for students.

These programs and activities are aligned with the three pillars of the framework, namely 'Teaching and Learning Experience', 'Knowledge and Skills' and 'Personalised Care'.

FIGURE 1: THE STUDENT WELLBEING & MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK.



Teaching and Learning Experience: this refers to programs and activities to support all students to thrive and flourish. It encompasses active learning and engagement in the classroom, creating wellbeing supporting learning environments through curriculum design and delivery, and facilitating socially connected learning in and outside the classroom, including participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (e.g., peer mentoring, student clubs and societies) to increase student connection and belonging.

Knowledge and Skills: this pillar encompasses programs and activities that will support student wellbeing and mental health through the development of psychological literacy and self-care skills. The aim is to empower students to champion their own needs, learn to regulate their emotions and behaviours in adaptive ways and care for their wellbeing on a daily basis to support their personal, social and emotional development and a successful student experience.

Personalised Care: the focus of this pillar is on the ways in which mental health services are delivered at the University, particularly considering the delivery of more phased (stepped-care) and integrated mental health services that are attuned to intersectional factors. This would include a consideration of triage services, coordination and navigation across the spectrum of the University's wellbeing and mental health services, to ensure integrated, personally tailored support.

The Student Life program has introduced a range of new initiatives to lift the student experience including the Melbourne Commencement Ceremonies, Melbourne Peer Mentoring Program, Academic Advising, Melbourne Plus and more curriculum-oriented initiatives such as the Discovery Subjects and the Next Generation Capstones. A central ambition associated with the introduction of the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* is to create stronger links between these programs and existing educational programs and activities, while at the same time introducing new well-aligned offerings that build on these existing programs.

This stronger integration between a student's experience of University life with their teaching and learning experience will also be a key goal of the Advancing Students and Education Strategy of the University being developed in 2022.

While the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* is defined by its three pillars, the approach to supporting student wellbeing and mental health will be one of active integration both across pillars and within existing programs. In short, the three pillars of the Framework will support an integrated approach to addressing the key areas of challenge currently facing students at the University.

By promoting a wellbeing supporting community, the *Student Wellbeing and Mental Health Framework* will foster an environment that aligns wellbeing and mental health activities, resources, and services across the institution, fosters connection and belonging among our student cohorts, reduces stigma around accessing services, and makes wellbeing and mental health a central focus to achieving both academic and social success during our students' time at the University.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through development of the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* it has become clear that there are a multitude of programs and resources, as well as dedicated staff and students focused on improving and supporting the wellbeing and mental health of our student community. Acknowledging this strong base and body of work, alongside the gaps identified, eight key recommendations flow from the Framework and respond to the core challenges currently facing the University.

Specific initiatives sit under each of the eight recommendations. Following University Executive endorsement of the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework*, these initiatives were further investigated and developed through an implementation workshop run by the Student Wellbeing Reference Group, and including students and academic and professional staff experts, to advise on the priorities for implementation. An Implementation Plan is being developed for prioritised initiatives over 2022-2023.

Recommendation 1:

Increase University-wide awareness and engagement with wellbeing and mental health.

Recommendation 2:

Strengthen psychological literacy, and knowledge and skills in wellbeing and mental health across the University community.

Specific initiatives to achieve R1 and R2 that will be further investigated include:

- deliver a wellbeing and mental health literacy campaign on all our campuses.
- increase education, training and resources for students and staff to develop knowledge and skills in wellbeing and mental health awareness and self-care.
- enable students to create a Wellbeing and Success plan by expanding existing resources such as the Joining Melbourne Modules, Melbourne Peer Mentoring Program and Academic Advising.

Recommendation 3:

Create and strengthen in-curriculum and co-curricular wellbeing supporting learning environments that enhance student connection and belonging.

Recommendation 4:

Create and strengthen in-curriculum and co-curricular wellbeing supporting learning environments that promote active learning and mitigate risks to mental health.

Specific initiatives to achieve R3 and R4 that will be further investigated include:

- develop staff resources and training in creating active learning, culturally aware and socially connected in-curriculum and co-curricular learning environments that build engagement, reflection and resilience to enable students to flourish.
- enhance efforts to schedule regular and consistent connections between classmates in particular cohorts to support friendship development and a sense of belonging.
- increase the use of a Pass/Fail grading system and reduce the use of high stakes assessments.
- distribute assessment workload across course subjects to enable students to better manage assessment stress and anxiety.
- develop and redesign curriculum through a wellbeing supporting lens and align with improvement programs such as FlexAP.

Recommendation 5:

Enhance the University's existing mental health services through the adoption and delivery of personalised mental health care using a stepped-care approach.

Recommendation 6:

Increase awareness of and access to a range of mental health services through the adoption of personalised mental health care that is increasingly attuned to intersectional factors.

Specific initiatives to achieve R5 and R6 that will be further investigated include:

- enable early identification of, and response to student mental health issues to reduce stigma and increase awareness of referral and support pathways.
- support existing mental health services to continue work to create more inclusive, trauma-informed, and culturally safe services.
- increase supply, access, and affordability of a range of mental health services that are increasingly attuned to intersectional factors and delivered through a stepped-care approach.

Recommendation 7:

Adopt a University-wide approach to student wellbeing and mental health informed by student participation.

Recommendation 8:

Adopt a University-wide approach to student wellbeing and mental health that aligns policy and practice and co-ordinates activities and programs across faculties and teams to ensure best use of resources.

Specific initiatives to achieve R7 and R8 that will be further investigated include:

- Expand current online resources to create a centralised Wellbeing Digital Hub to adapt, collate and link the range of wellbeing and mental health activities, programs, and services across the University.
- Strengthen and align the roles and activities of student associations (UMSU, GSA), Clubs & Societies, MU Sport, central units and faculties to enhance the physical, social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of students.
- Building on prior work of Scholarly and Student Services, further work will be undertaken to investigate opportunities to establish a Wellbeing Centre on the Parkville campus with links to in-person services and support across our campuses.



FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT: BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

The *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* has been developed in line with the Federal Government's 2017 Higher Education Standard's Panel, who recommended that all universities implement an institution-wide mental health strategy⁹. In their report, the Panel acknowledged the University of Melbourne as a leader in this area, already adopting an institution-wide approach to the development of wellbeing resources¹⁰ and the provision of mental health services for students and staff¹¹. This was guided by the work of the Mental Health Advisory Group, who led the development of the *University of Melbourne Mental Health Promotion and Support Strategy 2016-2018*.

Our academic experts in wellbeing and mental health have contributed sustained leadership to the field for over the past 10 years. This includes the internationally-leading framework development of the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE)¹² and Orygen (the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health)¹³, as well as more recent work of the Centre for Wellbeing Science (Melbourne Graduate School of Education)¹⁴, the Graduate Student Association (GSA)¹⁵, the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU)¹⁶, and the Melbourne University Health Initiative¹⁷. Crucial steps leading to the development of the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* included the implementation of a periodic institution-wide survey of student wellbeing by CSHE, that was first rolled out in 2013¹⁸, and again in 2017¹⁹ and 2021²⁰. This work was broadened by the University's commitment to the *Mental Health Principles of Universitas 21*²¹, and the delivery of the largest-ever survey of Melbourne University students (N=12,347) conducted in 2018-2019 by the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) in partnership with the Bupa Foundation²².

All of this work has played a key role in shaping our understanding of the scope and size of the challenges we face, with the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* building on this strong tradition of scholarship, collaboration with our students, and

being directly informed by data. A pivotal point for the University occurred in 2019 with the strategic prioritisation and launch of the *Student Life* program, which extended to developing an integrated and holistic framework to guide policy and practice for student wellbeing and mental health. As a result, the University established a Student Wellbeing Reference Group comprising academic experts, professional staff and students to specifically advise the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Life) on the development of the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework* and its implementation plan. This group has met bi-monthly since this time, both to support and advise on Framework development and to respond to the more immediate and pressing concerns raised by COVID-19, working in tandem with the University's Mental Health Advisory Group.

In 2020, a review of current research and best practice was undertaken, and the scope of the Framework was agreed by the Student Wellbeing Reference Group. A series of workstreams was then established by the Reference Group, led by academic and professional staff experts to further consult with a range of staff and students during 2020-2021 on the current and most pressing challenges facing student wellbeing and mental health at the University.

Informed by the research literature, the workstreams focused on areas such as mental health literacy, teaching and learning, barriers to service utilisation, physical wellbeing and food insecurity. The workstreams produced consultation reports, which combined with all other data sources, including a best practice review, mapping of current University of Melbourne wellbeing and mental health activities, student surveys and in-depth consultations, ultimately led to the creation of the *Student Wellbeing & Mental Health Framework*.

Further details regarding the Framework development are available in the [full Framework document](#).

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11 Tokatlidis, O. *UoM Mental Health Promotion and Support Strategy 2016-2018* (The University of Melbourne, 2016)

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16 Hadi M., *Racism at the University of Melbourne Report* (University of Melbourne Student Union, 2021)

17 *Collated Solutions - Global Health Case Competition* (Melb Uni Health Initiative, Strive Student Health Initiative & 180 Degrees Consulting 2021)

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- Dr Catherine Burnheim, Executive Director, Office of the Provost
- Jo Ligouris, Executive Director, Student & Scholarly Services and Academic Registrar
- Dr Leah Schwartz, Director Academic Strategy, Office of the Provost

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Please see the [full Student Wellbeing and Mental Health Framework document](#) for further background and a comprehensive reference list.





Get in touch

 www.unimelb.edu.au

 office-provost@unimelb.edu.au

 twitter.com/unimelb

 youtube.com/unimelb