Okay, so, I think the title here’s a little bit ambitious because it says understanding mental health and wellbeing off commencing students, but I don’t actually understand it, so… So maybe it should be working towards understanding.

Here’s the context of where this started. So it basically, I’m a first year advisor and I’m a close friend with one of the counsellors from student services. And one day we were chasing her two-year-old round a park. We were just talking about this common recognition and I was really concerned about the failure rate of my first years in particular assessment items which weren’t particularly difficult. But the failure rate was much more to do with not handing assignments in rather than people who were trying and not doing well.

Also I’d noticed that when I had managed to get hold of students who were having problems and getting a little bit of information about them that in many cases there were other things going on in their lives, aside from their confidence of study, that actually meant that they just weren’t in the right kind of mind space, or sometimes even the physical environment to actually study.

And my tutors also were coming to me saying, when we talk about, has this student been to class? It’s, oh yeah, maybe they did come at first but they, someone said they were sick, someone said they had, they were a carer for their mother, these kind of things. So there seemed to be this really big prevalence of things that I would call mental health or mental wellbeing kind of issues. Not necessarily mental health issues at the clinical stage, but certainly things within people’s ability to focus on study.

So what we did, in this initiative, is actually think about tutor training to help work towards this understanding and to help those students. So, I’ll quickly go through how we’ve kind of, I guess, translated the challenges in to needs.

So we know that students need assistance to comprehend what their student role is. And that student role is not just what they’re actually doing at university, but how that relates to what they do afterwards. And really importantly, how it links to everything in their life at that same time. The tutors are the frontline staff for understanding or being in contact with students. And they were noticing that there was a change in the cohorts.

And we thought one way to help them understand that would be to talk about that in the context of widening participation. Because that’s really fundamental to, well I think that’s really fundamental to what’s going on. And we know that tutors play a really important role in recognising wellbeing issues. Even just from the point of view that
they’re usually… we use usually third, fourth year tutors in my course. They’re must more relate, like closer to the first year students in terms of age and in terms of where they are in their lives.

So we know that we’ve got a really important resource to use them to say help us identify students who need some extra help.

So this is what we did. I worked with a counsellor from student services called Kylie Aitken, who many of you probably know. We designed two focus groups with our tutors. I teach a first year course in semester one. It has about, well a hundred to 130 students. And we have four or five tutors in there. So we actually, I actually approached those tutors and said would you be interested in helping us out a little bit, coming to a few focus groups? And they were all very keen. We also, Kylie drafted a set of what we call self reflective tools, which is all about just a series of different resources that I could use. Sometimes they were wording, things that I could put in to an e-mail, sometimes they were little bits of information about what happens if I go of track. Like resources that I could kind of pull from and e-mail students or build in to different parts of the curriculum. And we identified existing resources available for the students as well.

Okay, just going back to the focus groups… All of the tutors that were in the course were really keen to be involved. It was quite informal and it wasn’t expensive, just a tray of doughnuts and we paid the tutors for the hours they were there. And we particularly focused on… the first focus group was really about trying to understand or get some translation of the student voice through the tutors. We focused on identifying and explaining the widening participation agenda. Because we all think about the Bradley Report. It doesn’t mean anything to the students at this stage. When we talk to our tutors about widening participation, we actually have to break that down and tell them what it means in terms of the change of the nature of higher education.

We talked about student engagement. Kylie specifically talked about the research that’s identified what the barriers to engagement are. And issues specific to university culture. In between the focus groups Kylie developed a self reflective tool. We actually sent them to the tutors for feedback. When we came back for the second focus group, which was really about identifying, helping to identify and support students at risk, talking about the boundaries for tutors and talking about really straightforward explicit referral processes. So if there’s students with these kind of issues, it’s beyond the tutor’s role. They need to be referred to the convenor or in some cases referred to other parts of the university.

One thing that I got from the very small initiative that we did is I discovered that there are just really fantastic resources that are being produced around the university that we don’t necessarily all know about. And they’re things like, these amazing little postcards that student services create. So I’ve actually got some of those from student services and used them to send to some students sometimes. Just a little, and it’s a five minute job, and throw it in the mail room. And I think it may be, for some students it makes a difference.
It’s just small things, like I can see you’ve been working really hard. Keep going, come and see me if you need any help. Just very small things, but at least acknowledging that they’re not just a number.

As well, what we learnt? We’ve got some really great tutors, but I’m a little bit fussy with my tutors. I get in really early and I’m, I identify students who I know will be good tutors and start talking to them about a year before. So that the other lecturers can’t get them first. It’s a strategy, I probably shouldn’t tell anyone of that.

Like even from first year, I’ll even have, say to the tutors, who do you think would be a good person to bring in to the mentoring program in second year? So they act as a mentor and then potentially a tutor in third or fourth year. Communication between tutors and the course convenor’s really important and it shows students that we’re committed to supporting them. So if the tutor comes to me and say I think this student has an issue or have been missing class, I can send them an e-mail and say your tutor mentioned that you’ve been sick. Come and talk to us about it. Get him back on track.

Probably one of my biggest concerns is that we have these interventions but it’s really, we’re not doing as well as we should. Or I’m not doing as well as I should. We have amber risk and I’m very good at identifying which students are probably going to fail. And then they do. So we need to better understand our student cohort and I think as individuals, and this comes down to, not major changes, but usually it’s just more time, which means more resourcing. So smaller tute groups, training our tutors. Things like that.

The other thing that I’ve learnt that I’ve been really, it’s just kind of an extra thing that I didn’t really expect to happen, is that three of the four tutors actually were so interested in this topic that they actually have this semester done a 10 credit point special topic with me where they’ve looked in to particular issues about scholarship of teaching and about the links between education, which in this case is educating urban and environmental planners, about those links between education in higher education and then going in to the workplace. And they focused on topics of student expectations, resilience and mentoring. So that was just a bonus.

Our next steps. There’s, there are other first year tutors in my program, that are interested in this kind of training. So we could run a couple of sessions again, coming up to probably like the end of semester two, ready for next year. We can further embed our self reflective tools in to orientation and first year courses. We want to more formally evaluate the tutor outcomes. And we’d really like to evaluate the student outcomes, but that’s really tricky, we’re not quite sure how to approach that. And this would be something that I think would require quite a bit of design, maybe thinking about a longitudinal study, or additional ways of surveying students. Though everyone knows that our students are a little bit over surveying anyway. And evaluating the changes in terms of academic results.
So to really evaluate changes I think we have to know things about the individual and again, that’s probably not at the level that we’re able to work at all the time.

Okay, that was it.