

# STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING STRATEGY

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# Message from the Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor

Griffith University is committed to providing an inclusive, supportive environment that promotes positive mental health and wellbeing for all members of our university community and assists them to flourish and achieve success in academic, social, recreational, family, and work domains of life. We will offer student-centred programs, be responsive to students' needs and expectations, and will aim to provide timely support and advice for all students.

The Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy represents one element of Griffith University's overall Healthy University Framework that emphasises staff and student physical and mental wellbeing, a healthy lifestyle, healthy places, and a healthy community. It emphasises the importance of a strong culture in terms of equity, diversity, inclusion, respect, and safety. We recognise that successful implementation of this student-focussed strategy also involves assisting staff to support our students.

The University already has a comprehensive range of services and activities that facilitate and promote student mental wellbeing and assist those with mental health conditions. The Strategy builds on these current commitments while working towards addressing perceived gaps by providing clear guidance for the development and implementation of future-focussed services, activities and initiatives.

Professor Debra Henly

## The Vision

Griffith will provide an inclusive and supportive university experience that promotes student mental health and wellbeing.

## The Mission

To implement a Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy that supports the University's broader goal of creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all members of the university community, embedding a focus on mental wellbeing into all aspects of university culture.

## The Context: Australian Universities and Student Mental Health

Mental health conditions occur at a concerning level of prevalence in university student populations in western societies, including Australia, the UK, and the USA <sup>[1-4]</sup>. A large-scale international study recently reported that around 20% of university students had experienced a mental health issue of clinical severity over the previous 12 months <sup>[5]</sup>. Such problems most commonly relate to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders, with the onset of more severe disorders such as psychosis being less prevalent but certainly of concern. An even greater proportion of students report non-clinical levels of worry, distress, loneliness, and unhappiness <sup>[1]</sup>.

Mental health concerns are significant during late adolescence and early adulthood and this is clearly an important age at which to implement prevention and early intervention initiatives. Given current data suggesting that around 37% of 25-34 year-olds now attain a bachelor degree, universities are in an ideal position

to reach a substantial proportion of young people in order to promote and enhance mental wellbeing. This is particularly important given the finding that the majority of students with mental health concerns do not receive any form of professional mental health treatment <sup>[5, 6]</sup>.

Australian universities are expected to pay serious attention to the mental health and wellbeing of their students. [The Higher Education Support Act 2003 \(HESA\)](#) mandates the provision of counselling services by suitably qualified staff for domestic students, at no charge as does the [Education Services for Overseas Students \(ESOS\) Act 2000](#) for international students. The 2018 [TEQSA Guidance Note](#) on Student Safety and Wellbeing states that Higher Education Providers "will have an overarching framework of guiding policies and effective processes" for safety and wellbeing; and will take steps to understand and respond to the safety and wellbeing needs of the student body and cohorts within it.

In June 2018, the Federal government released the Higher Education Standards Panel's final report on [Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education](#) which recommended that all universities should have a mental health strategy supported by a genuine commitment and adequate resourcing, including appropriate staffing levels of university counselling services.

## Definition

Consistent with the World Health Organization definition, the Strategy accepts that mental health is not just the absence of a mental disorder but is “a state of wellbeing in which an individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” [7]. It also recognises a continuum of experiences ranging from mental wellness, to mild common worry, stress and low mood, and finally to more severe and enduring mental illness.

In addition to personal distress, mental health issues are known to lead to adverse effects upon functioning in many areas of life including personal relationships, work and academic outcomes. Students with mental health challenges are more likely to experience educational failure, tend to have higher rates of drop-out from university, and are subsequently less likely to have positive employment outcomes than their mentally healthy peers [5, 6]. Thus, the adverse consequences of poor mental health can be considerable for students and their families.

At Griffith University there is a strong focus on student wellbeing in all aspects of operations, and many current activities reflect good practice as identified in the Under the Radar Report [3]. Enriching and expanding these with new and innovative approaches to enhancing student mental health is an overarching objective of this Strategy.

## Key Features of the Strategy

In July 2018 a Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Advisory Group was tasked with providing advice on developing and implementing the Griffith University Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy to sit

within and support a University-wide Healthy University Framework.

To inform the development of the Strategy, the group examined information from a broad range of sources including:

- key policy and strategy documents from Australia, Canada, UK and US [3, 8-14]
- good practice exemplars of strategy and practice at other universities nationally and internationally
- a literature review of empirical evidence of outcomes of interventions to enhance university student mental health
- outcomes of, and written submissions to a workshop attended by 30 key university staff, representatives of student associations, and other stakeholders, workshop discussion and subsequent feedback on the draft strategy from workshop participants.
- consultation with mental health experts within the sector, students, and interviews with senior Griffith leaders
- the Australian tertiary education legislative and regulatory context.

The Strategy emphasises that enhancing emotional wellbeing of students should involve the whole University community, staff and students, across all areas of the institution. It recognises that a proportion of Griffith students are studying online as well as on-Campus, a significant cohort are undertaking Higher Degree Research studies with its specific challenges, and that many are living on or near Campus in residential contexts. For these students, Griffith is their home as well as their place of study.

The Strategy is cognizant of the multi-Campus structure of the University, and the diverse student population profile– including students from different educational, social and cultural backgrounds, with cohorts from overseas as well as urban and regional Australia.

It accepts that mental wellbeing lies on a continuum indicating that strategic interventions need to address the issue at multiple levels, including:

**all students** – where the goal is to provide a university experience that facilitates mental wellbeing for all university members

**students at risk of future mental health issues** – where the goal is to provide university experiences that aim to prevent the development of mental health problems through early intervention and prevention

**students experiencing mental health problems** – by providing access to timely, effective mental health services and support.

**students at immediate risk of harm** – by providing rapid access to effective crisis management and care.

## Strategic Goals

Thus, the Strategic Goals, framed as a tiered and targeted approach, are to:

FOCUS	STRATEGIC GOAL
<b>All university students</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide high-level leadership, policy and planning, systems and processes, that promote student mental wellbeing.</li> <li>2. Foster a supportive, inclusive, health promoting learning environment.</li> <li>3. Enhance the mental health literacy and supportive communication of university staff and students.</li> <li>4. Provide learning, teaching and curriculum experiences that promote mental wellbeing.</li> </ol>
<b>Students at risk of emerging mental health problems</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Establish systems and processes for early identification of and assistance for students who are at increased risk of developing mental health problems.</li> </ol>
<b>Students who are experiencing mental health problems</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Increase student access to evidence-based mental health services and programs on-Campus, online, and through external partnerships.</li> </ol>
<b>Students at risk of self-harm</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Provide timely and effective crisis intervention for students at risk of harm to themselves or others.</li> </ol>

## Strategic Goal 1:

*Provide high-level leadership, policy and planning, systems and processes, that promote student mental wellbeing.*

A healthy university environment requires high-level university leadership, governance, policy and planning, systems and processes that demonstrate commitment to enhancing student mental wellbeing and facilitate coordination of associated activities across the University.

### ACTIONS FOR STRATEGIC GOAL 1:

1.1 Situate the Strategy within the Health University Framework.

1.2 Embed the enhancement of student mental wellbeing as a key priority for the institution, through inclusion in role accountability statements, leadership messages, and relevant University strategic documents.

1.3 Establish a Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Advisory Group, reporting through the Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor to Executive Group, to advise on implementation, to oversee delivery, and to develop an Evaluation Framework for monitoring and evaluation of this Strategy.

1.4 Include reference to considerations of student mental wellbeing in relevant policy documents and terms of reference for committees, working parties and reviews.

1.5 Encourage participation and representation of students within University policy making and planning relating to student mental wellbeing at School, Group and University levels.

1.6 Ensure impacts on student mental wellbeing are considered in the design and implementation of university systems, processes, and policies.

## Strategic Goal 2:

*Foster a supportive, inclusive, health promoting learning environment.*

Griffith University recognises the importance of a learning environment (online and physical) that supports values of equity, diversity, respectful relationships, and positive communication; fosters student engagement, connectedness and meaningful participation in the University experience; promotes physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, and a sense of purpose; and builds resilience. For some students (i.e. those living in residences) the University is not only their place of learning and developing, it is their home. For others, their university experience takes place completely through digital interactions and they may never actually set foot on a physical Campus. The fostering of a supportive, inclusive, health promoting environment for such diverse groups of students requires a joined-up, whole-of-University approach.

### ACTIONS FOR STRATEGIC GOAL 2:

- 2.1 Increase student awareness of Campus facilities and extra-curricular activities (including programs, clubs, societies, and resources) to promote students' physical and psychological wellbeing, personal strengths and resiliency, sense of belonging and connectedness with other students, and their University.

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- 2.2 Establish a central, online hub that provides links to resources for staff and students to enhance student wellbeing, personal strengths, resilience, and learning. (Aligned with Actions 5.1 and 6.1)

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- 2.3 Promote, on-Campus and online, student services for student equity groups and particular community cohorts (eg HDR, First Nations, International, LGBTIQ+, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with a disability).

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- 2.4 Increase student awareness of mental health resources using multiple channels including traditional and social media, and through peer-based activities that contribute to mental health promoting programs. (Aligned with Action 3.5)

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## Strategic Goal 3:

*Enhance the mental health literacy and supportive communication of university staff and students.*

Griffith University will aim to increase the mental health literacy of students and staff in terms of their knowledge, awareness and understanding of the causes, nature, impact, prevention and treatment of mental health problems. This approach is designed to build a culture of awareness of mental health issues and acceptance of and support for those with mental health problems, thereby reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues. It also aims to increase knowledge about where and how to obtain assistance and ensure that staff and students feel comfortable about seeking help.

### ACTIONS FOR STRATEGIC GOAL 3:

- 3.1 Increase the proportion of academic and professional staff in regular contact with students (including tutors and peer-tutors), who complete mental health literacy and supportive communication skills training. (Aligned with Action 5.3)

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- 3.2 Include an emphasis on respectful staff-student communication in staff role descriptions and professional development.

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- 3.3 Increase opportunities for students to acquire mental health literacy skills and knowledge through curriculum and extra-curricular channels.

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- 3.4 Increase engagement of student associations and groups to initiate and implement mental health promoting activities, campaigns, resources. (Aligned with Actions 2.4 and 3.5)

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- 3.5 Increase student participation in service learning activities and peer-based programs (with appropriate recruitment and selection, and staff support) that include completion of mental health literacy programs and related programs, that develop and implement mental health promotion campaigns and awareness-raising activities, and that develop activities to encourage engagement and participation by other students.

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- 3.6 Explore the possibility of formally recognising students' completion of mental health literacy training (eg e-portfolios, micro-credentialing).

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- 3.7 Increase participation of Student Services within the curriculum (particularly in identified programs) to promote mental health and wellbeing and sources of help; and within Schools such as through presentations to staff meetings.

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## Strategic Goal 4:

*Provide learning, teaching and curriculum experiences that promote mental wellbeing.*

The University will provide learning and teaching experiences, including curriculum design and assessment practices that contribute to an inclusive and supportive learning environment, promote equity and diversity, build a positive self-concept, and enhance mental wellbeing. We will aim to build a culture of success by intentionally strengthening our students' ability to capably and confidently manage their learning. We know our students feel more engaged and empowered when they are positioned as active partners, where their voice is valued and encouraged, and where their courses provide opportunities for developing meaningful connections with peers and staff.

### ACTIONS FOR STRATEGIC GOAL 4:

- 4.1 Develop and implement guidelines and professional development opportunities (online and on-Campus) relating to practices and processes for teaching, curriculum design, assessment, and supervision that promote student mental wellbeing, minimise unnecessary stress, and build a sense of belonging, autonomy, competence, and purpose.

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- 4.2 Expand the use of curricular or extra-curricular modules to build skills for mental wellbeing and resilience at key transition points, and within specific programs that host an elevated proportion of students at risk.

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- 4.3 Expand the use of 'engaging pedagogies' (i.e., active, authentic and collaborative learning) in Courses and Programs to facilitate students' engagement in connected and meaningful learning communities.

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- 4.4 Develop guidelines, practices and cultures in courses and programs which facilitate students seeking and finding timely help and assistance.

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## Strategic Goal 5:

*Establish systems and processes for early identification of and appropriate referral and assistance for students who are at increased risk of developing mental health problems.*

It is important that the University has the capability to respond to students' early concerns about mental health issues and provide those at risk of developing mental health problems with opportunities to participate in preventative interventions.

### ACTIONS FOR STRATEGIC GOAL 5:

5.1 Establish an easy-to-access, clearly sign-posted, curated, online mental wellbeing hub that provides access to online, on-demand, early intervention resources and referral information. (Aligned with 2.2 and 6.1)

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5.2 Make use of existing University and learning analytics data for early identification of students at psychological risk, to alert relevant staff, and trigger personalised support and targeted information about resources.

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5.3 Ensure that staff in frontline positions who are most likely to come into contact with students at risk psychologically have completed culturally sensitive mental health literacy programs that increase awareness of early signs, risk factors, information on referral, and availability of helpful resources. (Aligned with 3.1)

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## Strategic Goal 6:

*Increase student access to evidence-based mental health services and programs on-Campus, online, and through external partnerships.*

Some students will enter university with existing mental health conditions, or these may appear in the course of their studies. The University can play an important role in assisting students to become aware of mental health issues, to encourage them to seek help, and to provide timely and easy-to-find access to culturally sensitive resources and professional support. This requires an interconnected, coordinated approach between areas within the University and with external agencies and services. The Strategy recognises that the need for student mental health support cannot be met solely through University services, necessitating the enhancement of external partnerships and greater use of innovative approaches to service delivery.

### ACTIONS FOR STRATEGIC GOAL 6:

- 6.1 Develop an easy-to-access, highly visible, curated, centralised online mental wellbeing hub, providing clear information about mental health problems, available services, referral sources, tip sheets, and access to evidence-based, online mental health interventions. (Aligned with Actions 2.2 and 5.1)
- 6.2 Strengthen collaborative links and partnerships within the University to enable a more coordinated approach to case management, and between the University and external services, clinics, and practitioners for longer-term treatment, resulting in clear pathways to care.
- 6.3 Extend, where possible, provision of Medicare rebatable services offered through Visiting Mental Health Consultants in Health and Medical Services (Student Services).
- 6.4 Explore options for extending brief, phone, online or face-to-face triage systems with referral to on-Campus, community or hospital services, as appropriate; with brief psycho-educational programs on-Campus and online for those who may not need intensive treatment (stepped care approach).
- 6.5 Expand the current After Hours Crisis Support Service to a 24/7 service, to supplement on-Campus services and improve triage, subject to a supportive feasibility and cost-benefit analysis.
- 6.6 Increase the contribution of Griffith Health Clinics to the provision of assistance for students with mental health issues, with enhanced partnerships between the Griffith Health Clinics and Student Services in delivering complementary programs and services.
- 6.7 Provide clear, easily accessible guidelines for staff (including staff in residential colleges) and students, about how to respond to, support and refer students with mental health conditions.

## Strategic Goal 7:

*Provide timely and effective crisis intervention for students at imminent risk of harm to the self or others.*

An important element of the Strategy includes building the capacity for the University to respond rapidly and effectively to students experiencing a mental health crisis, including those at imminent risk of self harm. This requires a well-communicated, coordinated and timely approach, access to 24/7 services on demand, and clear, easy-to-find resources for staff about how to best manage the situation.

### ACTIONS FOR STRATEGIC GOAL 7:

- 7.1 Review and widely promulgate protocols, policies and information for emergency and crisis response, for all University staff in relation to students posing a serious risk to self or others, and guidelines for students about how to respond, and refer when another student is in crisis.
- 7.2 Provide training in culturally sensitive crisis responding as part of induction training and professional development for staff who are most likely to come into contact with students in crisis, and briefings for senior officers with accountability for decision making in relation to critical incidents.
- 7.3 Ensure relevant staff from Student Services and the Griffith Health Clinics undertake ongoing professional development in screening of risk of self-harm, and development of care/welling and safety plans e.g. STARS protocol.
- 7.4 Provide appropriate support, self-help resources and post-incident guidelines for staff and students who are affected by a suicide or attempted suicide, or by other critical incidents impacting individuals or our broader learning community.
- 7.5 Explore the feasibility of expanding the Life Promotion Clinic to the Gold Coast Campus.

## Implementation and Evaluation

The University is committed to sustainable funding and resourcing of the Strategy as a key pillar of the Healthy University framework. The Strategy will be implemented under the leadership of the Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, commencing in 2019. It will be important for all areas and levels of the University to contribute to the Strategy, to report their contribution in their annual strategic documentation, and to monitor their progress in implementation.

An early task in 2019 will involve development of an Implementation Plan that specifies details regarding implementation of each of the actions outlined in the Strategy, timelines, accountable officers, targets and Key Performance Indicators for evaluating progress and success. The phase will also include the collection of baseline data against which to monitor outcomes.

Given the expectation that all areas of the University will contribute to the Strategy, local area Actions Plans will also be developed detailing activities to be undertaken, with associated timelines, and responsibilities.

A further task during 2019 will be development of an Evaluation Framework to:

- assist the University to monitor the quality and fidelity of implementation of the various elements of the Strategy and to assess the impact upon student wellbeing; and
- design an ongoing process of planning, review and improvement, providing transparent feedback to the areas involved in implementation, and to the University community.

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