

Submission to Mental Health Productivity Commission

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This is an individual academic submission, not an official position of my employer.

I research the reasons that students give to universities for their academic underperformance as they provide evidence to avoid exclusion – involuntary attrition - together with my colleague Dr Sophie Lindsay.

We found the extent of mental health issues surprising. These were overwhelmingly documented by health practitioners (GPs, psychologists or psychiatrists) and, consistent with other recent findings, mental health issues were reported by one-third of the students in our study.

People in universities having mental health issues is not new. We found student mental health issues are more prominent than found in previous research on attrition, and more complex than in recent work across the graduate student population. We found it particularly interesting that a complex range of other issues was co-related with mental health by nearly all our respondents.

This may reflect an increasing willingness to speak about mental health matters, or it may reflect a real increase in mental health problems and how much they're affected by other factors. But an inescapable and significant conclusion to our findings is an increasing need for student mental health support.

Further work is in progress to assess the relevance of this work to students in other universities, but our data already suggest that mental health services should be at the front line of support for students at risk of involuntary attrition. Ideally, these mental health professionals would have a network of additional services for students appropriate to individual needs, such as financial support or job boards. The University of Queensland is addressing this by making mental health a key priority in its strategic planning and decision making.

I request that the Commission consider encouraging all Australian universities to place mental health support services in the front line of student support. This may be done efficiently through the use of triage nurses in the first instance, as Monash University has recently instigated.

Attached please find the academic journal article we published last year (it's reasonably readable!) and also an article in The Conversation based on this work.