

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH

5 April 2019

Universities Australia (UA) is the peak body representing Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the economic and social benefits of improving mental health.

The mental health and wellbeing of students and staff is a key priority of Australia's universities. Institutions acknowledge the role that mental health plays not only in the academic success of students, but in their overall engagement with the university community. Universities also recognise the importance of promoting and maintaining good mental health among staff. Good mental health is important not solely for productivity; evidence shows that those who self-report good mental health are more deeply connected with their communities.

Australia's universities educate over 1.4 million students each year, with most university students aged under 25: 63.8% of the total 2017 student population (Department of Education and Training, 2019). As noted in the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper, most mental illnesses have their onset in adolescence or early adulthood. Therefore, young people may experience mental health concerns while they are studying at university.

Universities' commitment to ensure the mental wellbeing of their students and staff is demonstrated by the number of strategies, frameworks and partnerships in place across the sector. Universities address mental health through student-specific strategies, institutional frameworks, health and wellbeing policies and programs, the provision of mental health first aid, wellbeing networks, and work rehabilitation programs, among others. What is common to all is a commitment to a whole-of-institution approach; that is, the promotion of mental wellbeing within curricula, social and digital environments, and campus and community activities. There is also an explicit commitment to a whole-of-person approach to mental health.

While the implementation and delivery of strategies, frameworks and partnerships differs according to each university's context and needs, there are several objectives that are shared sector-wide. These include increasing people's understanding of mental health; recognising the value of prevention and early intervention; promoting self-management; fostering a supportive community; and delivering timely support.

Every university provides counselling services to students. Over 90 per cent of these services are provided free of charge. Limited service provision data shows that in 2013, over 90 per cent of those students who accessed counselling support provided by their universities presented with mild to moderate mental health issues, including anxiety, depression and stress (Andrews, 2016).

University staff and their families can access free counselling and psychological services through their university's Employee Assistance Program. Every university provides a range of professional development support to frontline staff in mental health first aid, or mental health resilience. Some universities provide online materials for those staff who have contact with students who identify as having a mental illness.

Many universities participate in the staff engagement survey – known as the Voice Survey – where staff can provide their views on issues affecting their work. Although there are no specific questions on mental health, employees are asked about their wellbeing, wellness and safety at work, if they feel supported by their university, their views on support available and relationships with supervisors. This survey is benchmarked to all industries.

Universities are not, and should not be, substitutes for under-resourced community and government mental health services. To support students and staff with mental health concerns, universities have partnerships with local mental health services, hospitals, police and other relevant agencies to facilitate timely and expert support. While universities have a duty of care to students and staff – and upholding this duty of care involves providing support services so people can remain engaged in their study and work – they are not specialist psychiatric services.

Universities Australia does not hold any data on student or staff mental health, but we are happy to continue to facilitate conversations between the Productivity Commission and those within the higher education sector who may be able to provide more information on student and staff mental health.

References

Andrews, A, 2016, 'ANZSSA Heads of Counselling Services Benchmarking Survey 2013 Summary Report', *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 47, pp.96–104.

Department of Education and Training, 2019, 'Table 2.1: All students by Age Group and Broad Level of Course, Full Year 2017', *Higher Education Information Management System*, Australian Government.