

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

CASE STUDY FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

WELLBEING FOR SUCCESS

Aligning mental wellbeing with increased academic success enables Flinders University to deliver a range of programs that support the development of mental health and wellbeing-related skills and appeal to students' collective desire for academic and personal achievement.

Achieving academic success is a goal most students aspire to achieve, yet many struggle with the demands of higher education.

Recognising the significant impact that mental health and wellbeing has on students' ability to concentrate, collaborate and participate, Flinders University offers a range of programs and initiatives aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of students so they can achieve both academic and personal success.

AN OASIS OF OPPORTUNITY

Based at Flinders University's Bedford Park campus, **OASIS** is a physical and digital space that provides students with ample opportunities to engage in holistic practices that enhance their mental wellbeing.

As e-mental Health Project Officer, Dr Gareth Furber works within Flinders University's Health, Counselling and Disability Services team and develops and facilitates programs that arm students with the knowledge and skills needed to cultivate mental wellbeing and achieve academic success.



"It's safe to assume that students want to be academically successful. And academic success flows from wellbeing," says Dr Furber.

He believes that most students accept the concept of self-care and how setting up healthy eating, sleep and study habits can contribute to improved mental wellbeing and better academic performance. The challenge for students is maintaining mental wellbeing during high pressure situations.

"Students might be studying full-time and working as well so it's pretty hard for them to find balance, but they're keen to learn how," says Dr Furber.

Originally operating as a multi-faith centre, in 2017 the focus of OASIS was expanded to include physical and mental wellbeing. OASIS now runs a range of online and face-to-face programs across three key themes:

- community and diversity;
- faith and spiritually; and
- mental and physical wellbeing.

"We want to appeal to the broadest range of students possible, so that anyone can find a service, program or event that is relevant to them," says Dr Furber.





Equipped with kitchen facilities, chill out spaces and prayer rooms, OASIS runs a range of programs aimed at building mental wellbeing, reducing stress and improving focus. From mindfulness meditation sessions to workshops on tackling procrastination, OASIS's programs give students the tools needed to succeed academically.

Lunches and conversation groups enable students to share their culture and stories, something that Dr Furber believes is especially helpful for international students who often struggle with mental health concerns caused or exacerbated by social isolation.

"OASIS is a popular place for international students who often don't have a social network when they arrive. It provides an environment where more complex relationships can form. On the surface, it may look like our programs just teach self-care skills, but beyond that OASIS fosters a sense of belonging," says Dr Furber.

29-year-old social work student Yumin Zhou regularly visits OASIS's weekly food market, which tackles food insecurity by providing students with easy access to free and low-cost nutritious food.

"OASIS is safe and warm. The people there understand that international students might have some difficulties, so they are very friendly and supportive," says Yumin.

"It's safe to assume that students want to be academically successful. And academic success flows from wellbeing."

DR GARETH FURBER, E-MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT OFFICER, HEALTH, COUNSELLING AND DISABILITY SERVICES

AN ACTION PLAN FOR WELLBEING

To further support students' wellbeing, Flinders University launched the [Be Well Plan](#) in early 2020. Developed in partnership with the SAHMRI (South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute) [Wellbeing and Resilience Centre](#), the five-week, personalised program contains wellbeing-boosting exercises and strategies based on the latest scientific research.

As Vice-President and Executive Dean of the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Professor Mike Kyrios oversees the university's wellbeing initiatives.

"Student wellbeing has to be our number one priority. University can be a lonely place, especially for students with mental health problems," says Professor Kyrios, who is also Director of the Órama Institute for Mental Health and Wellbeing.

The Be Well Plan is part of the university's work with SAHMRI to build an integrated, university-wide wellbeing framework that includes assessment, prevention and intervention. The program takes a cognitive, behavioural and strengths-based approach to addressing common mental health issues that impact on students' abilities to thrive socially and academically.

"We had an attrition problem. Many students were not able to manage the requirements of study. A large proportion of students at Flinders University are from rural and regional areas. Many students are also first in family to attend university, so we know that they're more likely to struggle," says Professor Kyrios.

The Be Well Plan involves five, two-hour sessions led by two trained facilitators. Facilitated face-to-face just once before COVID-19 hit, the program was moved online to offer support throughout the lockdown period. By July 2020, more than 80 students had completed a Be Well Plan online.

The program is tailored to the needs of participants and offers a range of evidence-based activities, such as mindfulness exercises and strategies on changing negative thinking. Initial results have been very promising.

"This intervention isn't just for people with a low degree of symptoms. People with more distress at the beginning of the program, do better. Those with the highest level of distress had a significant decrease in their distress levels as a result of this intervention," says Professor Kyrios, before adding, "I've never seen pilot data so good. It's very encouraging."

Dr Dan Fassnacht, lecturer at the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work agrees that the initial results are promising.

"The data was particularly good in the context of COVID-19. We would have been happy if wellbeing levels stayed the same but there was significant improvement," says Dr Fassnacht.

“I’ve never seen pilot data so good. It’s very encouraging.”

PROFESSOR MIKE KYRIOS, VICE-PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DEAN, COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK

“It shows that we were able to increase levels of wellbeing and decrease levels of psychological distress during a challenging time.”

Professor Kyrios believes that students who know how to look after the mental wellbeing of themselves and others have greater employment prospects. He’s keen for course credits to be awarded to students who have completed a Be Well Plan, thus forming a direct link between mental wellbeing, academic achievement and future employability.

As it stands, participating students gain credit as part of the Flinders Horizon Award, a program that provides opportunities to develop professional skills that can benefit students in their careers.

“The most employable students have the greatest sense of wellbeing,” says Professor Kyrios.

“Their ability to engage socially, promote themselves with confidence, and have a sense of self-agency is relevant to their ongoing success.”

“The data was particularly good in the context of COVID-19. We would have been happy if wellbeing levels stayed the same but there was significant improvement.”

DR DAN FASSNACHT, LECTURER, COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK

FIND OUT MORE

[Be Well Plan.](#)

[Flinders University Institute for Mental Health and Wellbeing.](#)

[OASIS Centre.](#)

[University Mental Health Framework.](#)

LINKS TO THE FRAMEWORK

Flinders University’s focus on providing programs and services that link optimal mental wellbeing to increased academic success supports students to develop mental health and wellbeing-related skills and competencies that prepare them for learning, their future careers and life.



This aligns with **principle three** of the [University Mental Health Framework](#).

Programs and initiatives to support students’ mental health and wellbeing typically involve a range of different practices. This case study also draws on other practices described in the framework by:

- providing services and supports that respond to the needs of specific student cohorts who are at increased risk of mental ill-health, including international students;
- incorporating digital approaches as part of OASIS and Be Well Plan to support student mental health and wellbeing.
- the partnership between Flinders University and SAHMRI, which enables the sharing of expertise and facilitates a joined-up approach to student mental health and wellbeing.

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