Mental health of Australian university students flying under the radar

Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health has released a major report that shows that while Australia provides world-class education and is an international leader in youth mental health, the mental health of university students has been largely ignored.

Titled ‘Under the Radar: The mental health of Australian university students’, the report suggests a lack of government policy attention and resources directed to this issue has impacted on the capacity for both the university and the mental health sectors to effectively respond to the needs of this group.

Three in five of Australia’s 1.4 million university students are aged between 15 and 24 years and we know at least one in four will experience mental ill-health in any given year. A lack of sleep, poor diet, drug and alcohol use, financial stress, work/study balance, living away from family and performance pressures are among the risk factors which can result in, or exacerbate, mental ill-health and psychological distress among university students, the report reveals.

“We need to ensure that student’s mental health and wellbeing isn’t compromised by their participation in higher education”, says lead author of the report, Senior Policy Analysist Vivienne Browne.

The report shows that many University counselling and disability support services have reported an increase in demand, complexity and severity of mental ill-health in students seeking support. However, many students still do not disclose or seek support for their mental health due to perceived (and actual) stigma about mental ill-health and a lack of understanding among some academic or administration staff about the seriousness of these conditions and effective ways to respond.

While the Australian Government’s directions in higher education policy over the past two decades has resulted in a significant increase in numbers of students in higher education settings, including students with experiences of mental ill-health, the report shows that opportunities to provide mental health promotion, early intervention and support to these young people are being missed.

“Not providing students with the support they need may result them dropping out and is potentially damaging career prospects or resulting in longer-term mental health problems”, says Ms Browne.

The report recognises that university leaders, staff and students are attempting to respond to these issues but are doing so without national leadership, data collection or comprehensive guidance. In these areas Australia is falling behind in comparison to the UK, USA and Canada in efforts to understand and address the mental health needs of university students.

“We need leadership and policy direction on this issue”, says Ms Browne.

“To effectively respond to students at risk of experiencing mental ill health, we must provide Australian universities with nationally recognised guidelines and resources”.

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The report recommends:

- Higher education and mental health policies clearly identify the role of their systems, services and programs in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of university students. Including extending mental health education programs into university settings.

- Establishing comprehensive and nationally recognised guidance to support universities to embed a whole-of-institution response to student mental health and wellbeing.

- Urgently addressing the existing gaps in data and Australian research into the mental health of university students

- A commitment to building stronger partnerships between universities and community mental health systems to improve service awareness, screening and referral pathways and to clarify the roles and expectations of services that supporting the mental health needs of university students

About Orygen
Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health is the world’s leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people.

At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Our work has created a new, more positive approach to the prevention and treatment of mental disorders, and has developed new models of care for young people with emerging disorders. This work has been translated into a worldwide shift in services and treatments to include a primary focus on getting well and staying well, and health care models that include partnership with young people and families.

For tips for journalists on responsible coverage of mental health stories visit the Mindframe website

Help-seeking advice

If the situation is an emergency please call 000
If you wish to speak to someone immediately who can help, call:

Kids Help Line
1800 55 1800
www.kidshelpline.com.au

Lifeline Australia
13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au