

Helping students with mental illness: Lessons from TAFE classrooms

As many as one in five people in the Australian population suffer from a mental disorder. In the course of their work, many technical and further education (TAFE) teachers and support staff encounter students who have a mental illness, even though this may not be disclosed at the time students enrol. The publication *Who's supporting us? TAFE staff perspectives on supporting students with mental illnesses* by C Miller and N Nguyen provides lessons from TAFE classrooms about how best to help students with a mental illness, based on interviews with frontline staff in six TAFE institutes across Australia.

TAFE teaching and support staff play a vital role in supporting students with a mental illness.

Staff claim that non-disclosure by students of their condition is a major issue that may be overcome by better health promotion on TAFE campuses.

They also tell us that outcomes for mentally ill students may be improved through better preparation of staff and closer links between TAFE institutes and local health services.

TAFE staff also identified a number of approaches they considered useful in meeting the needs of students with mental illnesses.

Impacts on learning

The impacts of mental illnesses on students are diverse and can significantly affect learning and completion of subjects and courses.

Teachers may not be aware of additional compounding factors also known to impact on learning outcomes, such as refugee or Indigenous status.

The Yurauna Centre at the Canberra Institute of Technology in the Australian Capital Territory helps staff and students to deal with culturally specific Indigenous issues—including mental health.

Located within the Reid campus of the institute, the Yurauna Centre provides a number of programs to increase awareness of and help in the provision of culturally appropriate solutions around learning and support for Indigenous students.

There are specific cultural issues relevant to Indigenous students, including ways in which Indigenous knowledge, family and spirituality interact with mental health and wellbeing. These issues may not be addressed or understood by counsellors and staff, and this affects learning outcomes for students.

Cultural awareness training, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural arts, Learning options for Indigenous students and Cultural education are just some of the programs provided by the centre for interested staff and students at the Canberra Institute of Technology. Staff at Yurauna are also available to provide support for Indigenous students in areas such as counselling and personal issues.

Non-disclosure by students of their mental illness is a major issue for staff, with teachers especially concerned about students who are still coming to terms with their illness. These students are often not yet connected with community health services and are at risk of dropping out of the system.

They're in a 'damned if we do and damned if we don't tell' position—if they do disclose ... that they have a mental illness, they risk being treated differently ... And if they don't and try to struggle on, then there's no accommodation for their needs. So I think for a lot of them, it's like [being] caught between a rock and hard place ...

Teacher



The use of e-counselling and text-messaging (SMS) at Box Hill Institute of TAFE in suburban Melbourne is a new approach for reaching students, particularly those who have trouble disclosing their mental illness.

E-counselling provides students with the opportunity to seek assistance and advice using links provided on the student website. Personal/educational counsellors at Box Hill, who are all registered psychologists, then reply within three working days, and the online messaging may continue until the issue is resolved. The messages are encrypted for confidentiality and privacy reasons.

The benefits of e-counselling are that students can access the service from anywhere and at any time and, furthermore, they don't have to go through the anxiety of physically approaching the counselling office. It also gives students a chance to think about the responses they receive from the counsellors. Because they don't need to participate in an immediate one-on-one interaction, some of the pressure is taken off them.

In addition to the e-counselling service, Student Support Services staff are also able to use a web-based SMS system to contact the students and vice versa. So when a student isn't attending, or a follow-up after a counselling session is needed, or a change of appointment time is required, staff are able to contact the student through SMS, with their upfront permission. Staff are finding this a less confrontational way of encouraging students with mental health or other issues to stay engaged in their learning or remain connected to support staff.

Support for staff

Staff require *collegiate support* to respond confidently to the diverse needs of students with mental illnesses. This includes more opportunities to debrief and network with experienced colleagues.

Although *professional development* in the area of mental health would help to improve the skills and confidence of staff, it needs to be accessible and practical, and meet the needs of their different levels of responsibility.

Mental health first aid is a professional development course which is helping to improve staff knowledge and confidence to support students with mental illnesses at TAFESA North in South Australia and Swan TAFE in Western Australia.

The *Mental health first aid* course was developed in 2000 by Tony Jorm and Betty Kitchener from the University of Melbourne to help people in the community to learn key aspects of assisting people with mental illnesses, particularly at times of crisis. The course is also designed to improve mental health literacy across Australia.

The course has been found to increase the knowledge of mental health problems, decrease the stigma associated with the illness, and increase confidence in providing support.

The course runs for twelve hours over two days, and is available in all Australian states and territories. TAFESA North and Swan TAFE are committed to providing this course for their Community Services staff.

Instructor training, which runs over five days, is also available. Some of the staff at TAFESA North are qualified to teach this course, giving them the flexibility to provide this course at their institute.

'VET is about education, not therapy.'

Teacher

Staff felt that community health services see TAFE as a therapeutic option for their clients, rather than vocational education and training (VET) in its own right. Developing partnerships between institutes and key mental health services may help to improve support for students.

Staff felt that there was a lack of clarity about the extent of their roles in supporting students with mental illnesses. Staff acknowledge their responsibility to provide duty of care, but agree that their roles should not cross over to actual provision of personal support. Clear protocols and processes can help staff feel confident in providing students with consistent and appropriate support.

... the lecturers are educators, that's their prime role, they're not counsellors or social workers ... They should have the knowledge

to be able to identify when it becomes an issue ... and then they should have appropriate people to be able to refer those students to.

Teacher

Reasonable adjustments are required to meet the different needs of students with mental illnesses. However, it can be difficult making reasonable adjustments to courses and still fulfil particular Australian Quality Training Framework requirements. The *Disability Discrimination Amendment (Education Standards) Act 2005* details the obligations of education providers to make reasonable adjustments.

Assessment shouldn't be about who can handle the stress best, it should be about enabling students to show what they know rather than seeing whether or not they can survive an exam or an assessment, and if there's an alternative way they can do that, then why not?

Teacher



Mental health promotion

Mental health promotion can address students' lack of disclosure of mental illness. Positive promotion of mental health may help to improve issues around stigma and dispel misconceptions about mental illnesses. Mental health promotion is underused in the TAFE environment.

... a lot of people don't see mental health as a disability ... A lot of people function very effectively, but it's when it causes disability that it then becomes an issue for students.

Manager

... I think that, while there's a lack of knowledge, you focus on the exceptional behaviour rather than the day-to-day ...

Chief Executive Officer

The current focus at Wodonga TAFE in regional Victoria is on implementing a system of 'individual learner management'.

This strategy will follow each student from the time they enrol (and sometimes before) through to brokering employment, and everything in between. The principles of individual learner management are embedded in the Wodonga TAFE Strategic Plan, 2006–2012, <<http://www.wodonga.tafe.edu.au>>.

The institute expects that it will be better positioned to respond immediately and appropriately to the needs of all its students, including those with a mental illness. A critical aspect of the system is the highly active Disability Support and Equity Unit.

Strategies to help learning

Challenger TAFE in Western Australia offers specific courses for students with mental illnesses.

The course, *Connections to living and learning—accredited training for people with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder*, has been running since 2004 and is an outcome of a community of practice involving Challenger TAFE and several external services, including the main partner, the Fremantle Hospital Alma Street Centre.

The course focuses on re-integrating people with significant mental health disorders into social and work environments and is based primarily on building relationships with others. The course has built-in evaluation that enables the model to be refined to suit the various needs of the students who participate.

REAL options and *Building bridges* are two courses provided by Wodonga TAFE, and offer choices for people returning to education.

REAL options is designed specifically for people with mental health difficulties in the Albury/Wodonga region.

This program gives students the chance to direct what modules and competencies are provided each year, and students have an individual vocational plan that sets out their goals, where they are at currently, and where they want to be in the future. Students can choose from modules in communication, hospitality, horticulture, office administration and information technology towards a Certificate I in Transition Education.

Building bridges is a similar course designed for a wider range of people wanting to access TAFE and who would like to sample course offerings and the support available before they move into mainstream courses. Like *Real options*, this course allows flexibility for people who have a mental illness or who have other issues to attend as regularly as they can, and then return to the learning program if they have a period of absence.

The combination of programs is designed to provide different levels of engagement with TAFE for people with mental health difficulties, ensuring that they can maintain their learning activity and build up to the level of entry of mainstream TAFE programs at Wodonga Institute.

For more information about the programs listed:

- Yurauna Centre—Canberra Institute of Technology
Contact Caroline Hughes <Caroline.Hughes@cit.act.edu.au> or at <<http://www.cit.act.edu.au/yurauna/>>.
- E-counselling—Box Hill TAFE
Contact Jana Andrews <J.Andrews@bhatafe.edu.au> or Howard Errey <h.errey@bhatafe.edu.au>.
- *Mental health first aid*: <www.mhfa.com.au>.
- *Connections to living and learning*—Challenger TAFE
Contact Suzette Thompson <Suzette.Thompson@challengertafe.wa.edu.au>.

- *REAL options* and *Building bridges*—Wodonga Institute of TAFE
Contact Bryan Winnett <bwinnett@wodonga.tafe.edu.au>.

- *Individual learner management*—Wodonga Institute of TAFE:
<<http://www.wodonga.tafe.edu.au/>>.

To access a copy of the report:

Who's supporting us? TAFE staff perspectives on supporting students with mental illnesses by C Miller & N Nguyen, NCVET, Adelaide, 2008, available at <www.ncver.edu.au/>.



Are you worried about a student's mental health?

Staff identified a number of approaches useful in meeting the needs of students with mental illnesses. Below are some potentially helpful strategies and resources.

Have you talked to the student confidentially?

- Many students do not disclose their mental illness and may just be starting to experience mental health difficulties.
- You can discuss alternative study options with students, and the support available—which is different for everyone.
- You can let students know about available counselling services, but remember you cannot force students to use them. Also, counsellors cannot contact students unless first approached by the student.

Have you contacted the disability services unit?

- Each institute has a disability services unit on campus to support students.
- Services may be located at a particular campus or be available at certain times.
- Your disability liaison officer (DLO) can let you know what support is available.
- Disability services can also inform you of institute disability policies and how best to assist your students.

Have you talked to on-campus counsellors?

- On-campus counsellors (if available) are located within the disability services unit.
- They can offer advice and strategies to help support students.

Have you talked to a colleague or manager about what to do?

- Debriefing and networking with experienced colleagues are useful strategies.
- Staff can share strategies and information to provide appropriate support for students.
- Talk in general terms without disclosing any personal details about students to other staff.

Have you called the local mental health service or the youth centre to get some advice?

- Sometimes, the best people to contact are mental health professionals in the community.
- Ask your disability liaison officer or counsellors to provide your area with a list of contact numbers.
- Other professionals include: psychiatrists, case managers, psychiatric rehab services, and the local crisis team.

Some suggested resources

Current resources developed for staff

Staying the course—Department of Education and Training, Western Australia, <<http://www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au/AccessEquity/resources.aspx?menu=5&menulitem=5#S>>.

Mental health issues on campus: A resource kit for staff, J Andrews & P McLean 1999, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/341.html>>.

Mental health issues on campus: A resource kit for students, J Andrews & P McLean 1999, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/381.html>>.

Guidelines for making reasonable adjustments for learners with a disability—Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Queensland, <http://www.trainandemploy.qld.gov.au/partners/fact_sheets_and_resources/resources/people_specific_needs.html#guidelines>.

Useful links to initiatives and programs on mental health

BeyondBlue, <<http://www.beyondblue.org.au>>.

The Richmond Fellowship in your state or territory (see White Pages for contacts).

Relevant legislation for mental illness and disability

Disability Discrimination Act 1992, <<http://www.comlaw.gov.au/ComLaw/Legislation/ActCompilation1.nsf/all/search/FC69105BAF504384CA2571400006FD7F>>.

Disability Discrimination Amendment (Education Standards) Act 2005, <<http://www.comlaw.gov.au/ComLaw/Legislation/LegislativeInstrument1.nsf/all/search/198C29A82B9F59AECA25703C000B6A51>>.

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