Literature Review

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF TERTIARY LEARNERS: WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

Suzie Bartlett and Jean Ross

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*Given the global prevalence and burden of mental illness, it is likely there would be a significant number of learners with emotional problems enrolled in tertiary study, both with a formal diagnosis and with no formal diagnosis but with disabling symptoms.*

(Storrie, Ahern & Tuckett, 2010, p.2)

## INTRODUCTION

Student (learner) engagement in tertiary education has never been so high in the history of education (Grøtan, Sund & Bjerkeset, 2019). What does this mean? What does this entail for learners and organisations? Is this sustainable? Storrie et al., in their quote above alert us to the growing global mental illness of learners connected with tertiary study. In this paper we acknowledge Storrie et al's (2010) concerns while offering suggestions that could improve the health of learners and sustain their tertiary study.

Tertiary education refers to all formal post-secondary education, including public and private universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools (World Bank, 2022). These organisations all deliver a variety of educational options, often in flexible ways to meet the needs of adult learners including, online and distance learning (NZQA, 2022). Although some learners prefer face to face teaching, Hsu and Shiue (2005) point out that distance learning programmes can serve geographically diverse learners and increase access to programmes that would otherwise have been limited to on-campus students using telecommunications and information technologies. These technologies, for example can also be used for student support and online counselling.

There are currently around 200 million tertiary education students studying in the world, an increase from 89 million in 1998 (World Bank, 2017). This rise in the populace of tertiary learners corresponds with a rise in the numbers of mental ill-health of learners with significant numbers presenting to tertiary support services, and/or academic staff (Bartlett, 2022). Contributing factors leading to experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing for example, can be financial or social pressures (a sustainable concern) which can put learners at added risk (Thorley, 2017).  Learners therefore need to be able to effectively negotiate these risks to ensure educational success and maintain their mental health at the same time (Bartlett, 2022). According to Slavin, Schindler and Chibnall (2014) this is evident in the high levels of mental ill-health reported by learners, internationally, nationally, and locally and the extent to which tertiary providers have experienced pronounced increases in the number of students seeking mental health support.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Terminology is important to understand in the complex speciality of mental health. Correct terminology can reduce stigma and increase awareness of mental health. *Mental health, wellness and mental ill-health* are key terms and are defined below.

The World Health Organisation (2022, p. 1) constitution states:

> *"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."*

An important implication of WHO's definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities.

**Mental health** is defined as a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to contribute to his or her community (World Health Organisation, 2022).

**Wellness** is considered, "an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward, a more successful existence" (Stoewen, 2016, p. 983). This definition is based on three tenets that:

- wellness is considered a conscious, self-directed, and evolving process of achieving full potential,
- wellness is multidimensional and holistic, encompassing lifestyle, mental and spiritual well-being, and the environment,
- wellness is positive and affirming.

Stoewen (2016) further expresses that the difference between health and wellness, is "health is a state of being, whereas wellness is the state of living a healthy lifestyle. Health refers to physical, mental, and social well-being; wellness aims to enhance well-being" (p. 983). Within the tertiary learning environment, given numbers of learners presenting with poor mental health is on the rise (Bartlett, 2022; Storrie et al., 2010), it would make sense to strategise around enhancing learners' mental health and wellbeing, whilst they are undertaking academic study to promote and support their retention and success.

Understanding mental illness and mental ill-health is necessary to accommodate the numerous interprofessional relationships who work individually or collectively with learners.

**Mental ill-health** is characterised by the World Health Organisation (2022) as a clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour. It is usually associated with distress or impairment in important areas of functioning. Importantly Te Hiringa Hauora, Health Promotion Agency (2021) highlight that poor mental health does not necessarily come with a diagnosis of mental illness, whether people meet the criteria for a medical diagnosis, their mental health can be poor.

Mental ill-health is defined by EVERYMIND as "The broad term, often used as an umbrella term, that includes both mental illness and poor mental health" (2022, para.2) mental health can include prolonged high stress levels, general unhappiness with life, and ongoing low levels of depression and anxiety and can interfere with a person's cognitive, emotional, or social abilities.  Some people who experience poor mental health for a long time, or who are highly distressed, may meet the criteria for being diagnosed with a mental illness (Te Hiringa Hauora, Health Promotion Agency, 2021).

Poor mental health and wellbeing can also affect a learner's academic performance and their desire to remain in higher education (NZUSA, 2018). Slavin et al. (2014) report higher incidence of poor mental health in tertiary students than the general population.  These findings identify that simply being a tertiary student may constitute a risk factor for mental health problems.

We also note that affective and anxiety disorders are common presentations among tertiary learners. Academic stressors that have been identified among learners include examinations and assignments, large workloads, and lack of free time (Bartlett, 2022). Students, who are academically resilient, can overcome adversity in their lives and still succeed in their programme of study. In addition to academic pressure, financial, social, and relationship pressures become heightened and often the learner is away from home for the first time, they can have a lack of connectedness causing increased social isolation, they can struggle with the higher level of study, and they are at the age where the onset of some major mental illness symptomology can start to occur (Bartlett, 2022). It is unsurprising then, that learners can start to show signs of mental ill-health and then present to support services or academic staff in a state of distress.

Stallman and Shochet (2009) state the impact of tertiary study on learners may be contributing to poor mental health and that there is potential that tertiary institutions are indeed contributing to learner mental ill-health. *The Kei Te Pai? Survey* (2018) conducted by the New Zealand Union of Students Association (NZUSA) was the first of its kind gaining insights into the mental health and wellbeing of tertiary students enrolled at universities and polytechnics in New Zealand. NZUSA (2018) propose students' mental health was declining whilst undertaking academic study within the New Zealand context.

## SUSTAINABILITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Mental wellbeing is a natural part of an individual's health and in particular tertiary learners' engagement with tertiary organisations. Sustaining and improving the mental wellbeing of tertiary learners engages with an interprofessional approach, we strongly suggest all tertiary organisations play their part in the sustainable mental wellbeing of learners. However, we recognise the difficulty amongst health care disciplines that the concept of sustainability remains ambiguous (McMillan, 2014). Acknowledging that there is a distinction between sustainability and sustainable development may assist in the ongoing debate about sustainability and health. Sustainability is commonly understood as a destination implying a means to an end, while sustainable development is a means of getting there, problem solving, goal setting and critical thinking. Four fundamental concepts of sustainable development include health; politics; capitalism and climate change, and when linked together is where sustainable development forms the foundation of interprofessional practice and mental health care. We recommend tertiary organisations consider these sustainable development concepts as they work to improve and maintain the mental health of tertiary learners. Firstly, promoting learners to reflect on their own resilience; secondly, establishing a sustainable curriculum design and thirdly, facilitating a mental well-health sustainable environment. We further expand on these in our recommendations below:

**Promoting learners to reflect on their own resilience:**

- encourage potential learners to identify and develop their own protective factors prior to embarking in tertiary study, this may help them understand the areas where strategies for developing academic resilience may be useful. For example, if a learner finds it challenging to leave their home environment due to strong family/whānau/community connections being the main protective factor, studying with a local tertiary provider may be a more suitable option to advantage their learning (Bartlett, 2022). Staying connected to family/whanau at a local tertiary provider could also protect against social isolation.

- support the learner who may have many stressors and a high level of resilience including understanding of their protective factors, academic success and good mental health and wellbeing, then coping in the face of adversity is much more likely (Bartlett, 2022). Crane and Searle (2016) suggest events stemming from stressors and adversity can have long term significant effects on a person's mental health and wellbeing. If a learner has many stressors including academic failure, poor family/social connections, financial burden and /or mental ill-health coupled with poor resilience, this may cause failure to cope (Crane & Searle, 2016),

- supporting learners in developing strategies for resilience, a vital tool when pursuing academic study. Whilst help seeking is deemed a positive strategy for tertiary learners, resilience is also a key concept (Bartlett, 2022),

- there are different ways in which academic staff in tertiary organisations can build good foundations for resilience in learners. These include developing student's self-confidence by individualising tasks where possible, enhancing self-determination through planning and persistence, and encouraging feedback that does not place too much emphasis on comparison with peers (Martin & Marsh, 2006). It is important to note however, an increased incidence of learners presenting with mental illness, or poor mental health is not necessarily a negative. A higher number of learner presentations could also be a consequence of learners feeling more comfortable in presenting to tertiary support staff for assistance due to a decrease in stigma in society, and /or their tertiary institution (Bartlett, 2022). Learners may feel that discussing their lived experience is a proactive step, for staff to understand them and provide support where needed (Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson, 2005). Higher numbers of learner presentations can therefore be viewed as a positive outcome.

**Establishing a sustainable curriculum design:**

- create safe and supported learning spaces to promote enhanced wellbeing of learners,

- recognise learners' potential stressors and implement curricula changes that are designed to address these' stressors.

**Facilitating a mental well-health sustainable environment:**

- implementation of mental health support at tertiary institutions, confidentiality, location, times, convenience of office hours, and financial cost are all important to consider,

- embrace technology (apps/online CBT/self-help websites etc.) which has the potential to play a significant role in improving mental health and wellbeing. The use of technology could be useful in health promotion, mental health literacy, and encouraging at-risk learners to seek support and treatment (Farrer et al., 2013). Online interventions related to mental health and wellbeing can be easily accessed, are cost effective, less stigmatising (Farrer et al., 2013) and can be executed in the privacy of one's own home, in their own time, at their own pace. Mental health literacy is reported by to be positively correlated with help seeking behaviour in university students (Gorczynski, et al., 2017). Initiatives to promote mental health literacy in learners may therefore be useful.

Furthermore, it is therefore imperative that there are strategies that tertiary organisations can implement to ensure a sustainable population of tertiary learners by enhancing positive mental health and wellbeing whilst undertaking academic study. In this paper we have offered solutions to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of tertiary learners.

## CONCLUSION

The age of onset of poor mental illness is equivocal to the age many students commence tertiary study, while the number of tertiary learners has increased, we can therefore deduce that there could be an increase in the number of students presenting with poor mental health. Learners with mental ill-health often appear to struggle in the tertiary environment. To support learners suffering from emotional stresses or mental ill-health whether formally diagnosed or undiagnosed, support and academic staff of tertiary organisations need to have a better understanding of the learners' triggers including the barriers to seeking help due to stigma, lack of knowledge about the services available, and lack of resources, feelings of hopelessness, stress and COVID-19 pandemic issues. The key for learners staying mentally well during academic study is for tertiary organisations to engage with the sustainable development concepts suggested in this paper as they work to improve and maintain the mental health of tertiary learners.

Suzie Bartlett ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7457-1066 is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Nursing at Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand. She has 17 years' experience working as a clinical nurse in acute care, primary health and mental health before joining Otago Polytechnic where she has been a mental health nurse educator for the last 10 years. Suzie completed her Doctor of Professional Practice in February 2022; her research focus was on tertiary learner mental health and wellbeing and the development of a national framework. Suzie has published journal articles nationally and internationally in relation to the mental health of tertiary learners, disrupted learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the merits of mental health simulation.

Jean Ross ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2467-9233 is Professor of Nursing, originally from Wales, UK. Jean has more than 30 years' experience of working with the rural nursing workforce in New Zealand. The cumulation of her work associated with rural nursing, includes activism, research, and education. Education includes undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral engagement. Jean in 1994–2003 established the Centre for Rural Health in New Zealand of which she was co-director. Jean is also an advocate for sustainable rural community development and nurse education. Jean's focus is research directive which both informs and directs her practice.

Correspondence to: Suzie Bartlett, School of Nursing, Otago Polytechnic | Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, Forth Street, Private Bag 1910, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand.  Email: suzie.bartlett@op.ac.nz

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