# Teaching and curriculum design to support mental wellbeing

Inclusive Education Community of Practice, 3 August 2020

## Brief event summary

**Dr Mary Dracup**

More than 100 Deakin staff took the opportunity to hear from a panel of Deakin staff and students on ‘Teaching and curriculum design to support mental wellbeing’. This Inclusive Education Community of Practice event was well timed as Victoria went into lockdown again. The panel, moderated by Dean of Students Lisa Hanna, included:

* **Karen Stuart**, Manager Counselling & Psychological Support Services—on the Deakin Student Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategy and what teaching and professional staff can do to help implement it
* **Kiernan Cleary**, DUSA President—on his own experience and wider perspective of students’ mental health stresses, particularly at the moment
* **Sally Buchanan-Hagen**, Lecturer in Nursing—giving a ‘consumer advocate’ perspective of mental health and wellbeing as a student and staff member
* **Tegan Whitten**, DUSA Accessibility and Services Representative, Geelong—on her lived experience of mental health conditions and ways curriculum and teaching strategies help her to manage
* **Susie Macfarlane**, Senior Lecturer, DLF Health Pod Manager—on curriculum design and teaching practice to support mental health and wellbeing.

**Karen Stuart** started by introducing the new [Deakin Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](https://deakin365.sharepoint.com/sites/StudentMentalHealthWellbeingStrategy), outlining its whole-of-university, inclusive, proactive, evidence-based and student-centred approach and implementation plan. She also gave her perspective as the Manager of Deakin’s Counselling & Psychological Support Services on the increasing mental health risks students are coping with under COVID-19 conditions. Karen said one in four students were likely to experience a mental illness in any year, and this was likely to increase this year. Students suffering financial disadvantage, international, Indigenous and gender/sexually diverse students face heightened risks.

The Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy aims to ‘nurture the mental health and wellbeing of all students, fostering an environment of guidance and support, enabling students to thrive in their academic and personal endeavours’. Taskforces across the university are developing action plans to implement the Strategy, including changes to policy, procedures, services, environments and curriculum. See Karen’s [slides](http://blogs.deakin.edu.au/iccb/wp-content/uploads/sites/170/2020/08/Mental-wellbeing-panel-Inclusive-ed-CoP-4-08-2020-slides.pptx) for more information.

Attendees heard moving accounts from the two students, **Kiarnan Cleary** and **Tegan Whitten**, on the difficulties they and other students face, with or without pre-existing mental health conditions. These included common feelings of isolation even on campus, challenges keeping up with assessments even when hospitalised, having to overcome stigma and negotiate accommodations with sometimes disbelieving staff.

The students, both DUSA executives, didn’t miss this opportunity to explain how teachers’ choices over curriculum could make a huge difference to their ability to cope and thrive. These included to use learning activities to help students to connect with one another; point them to services; accept students’ access plans without making judgements about them; use inclusive approaches like providing transcripts and clear instructions; and convey a supportive, nurturing stance by using supportive language.

**Sally Buchanan-Hagen** gave an equally moving and instructive account of her experience of significant mental health problems when she was a student. She explained how her experience now guides her practice as a Nursing lecturer. For example, she recognises that many students will be experiencing adversity that teachers will know nothing about, but teachers can nevertheless play a key role in encouraging them through these periods. Allowing students to stay on the periphery of action if they wish, rather than expecting them always to engage, could be crucial. She noted that students’ overall self-esteem could be boosted simply through achieving learning outcomes; and teachers need to be ‘champions of hope’ and avoid making ill-informed judgements.

**Susie Macfarlane** was the last speaker, drawing on her research and experience as a psychologist and more recently as an academic and Deakin Learning Futures Health Pod Manager. Susie acknowledged that learning involved many challenges, and that supports and scaffolds needed to be built into curriculum, for example following Universal Design for Learning. She listed signs of mental health difficulties among students; and the importance of using inclusive assessment and feedback strategies build their self-efficacy and evaluative judgement. For more information see [Susie’s slideshare](https://www.slideshare.net/susiemac/curriculum-strategies-supporting-students-mental-health). She recommended the OLT [University framework for promoting student mental wellbeing](http://unistudentwellbeing.edu.au), which provides ‘a suite of resources to assist university educators to develop policies, curriculum and teaching and learning environments that better support student mental health’.