

The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health – Issues Paper

Navitas Response

5 April 2019

Navitas welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government Productivity Commission's Issues Paper relating to The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health. We believe positive mental health has significant potential to support social and economic participation, and enhance productivity and economic growth.

We also welcome the substantial investment the Australian Government announced in this week's Budget to support mental health wellbeing. The package includes \$461 million for youth mental health prevention services and a \$114.5 million adult Headspace trial, with eight mental health centres for stressed-out working-age Australians to offer support, including outside of office hours. The measure expands on Headspace's existing services for young people, which are set to receive an extra \$263.3 million over seven years, including funding to open 30 new centres and reduce waiting lists for services.

As a global education provider employing more than 7,000 staff to deliver education and training programs to more than 70,000 students each year, Navitas recognises the impacts that mental ill-health can have on learning and teaching experiences and outcomes, and on an individual's ability to participate in society. We further acknowledge the critical role that academic and support staff are increasingly required to play in identifying and managing mental ill-health, and we are building the capability of our staff. However, the development and distribution of best practice guides and toolkits – and the provision of tailored training at a systemic level – would bolster institutional-level initiatives that support mental health and wellbeing.

Our response to this Issues Paper is focused predominantly on the ways in which education providers such as Navitas can contribute to improving economic participation and productivity through improving mental health. Throughout, we have cited examples of initiatives undertaken by Navitas colleges and institutions to proactively address mental health issues impacting both our workforce and our students.

Assumptions relevant to mental health and productivity

- Mental health needs, issues, and illnesses, and their consequent impact on economic performance and productivity, vary significantly among Navitas student cohorts (e.g. international students, domestic students, mature age entrants and school leavers).
- Special consideration must be given to supporting students and staff who are at increased risk of preventable mental health problems and/or have limited access to mental health services (e.g. students in regional areas, the LGBTI community, international students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people).
- There is no 'one size fits all' approach to preventing, promoting, identifying or addressing mental ill-health to improve social and economic participation within the education sector. A flexible mental health framework will help to ensure that approaches and solutions can be tailored to the unique needs of each student or staff member.

Support and development key to positive mental health outcomes

Student wellbeing

Navitas advocates for a whole-of-institution approach to mental health, underpinned by a framework of prevention, promotion, support and development. This framework would have a focus on:

- raising awareness of mental health and promoting initiatives that encourage positive mental health (e.g. engaging students with their community and facilitating an active lifestyle);
- ensuring teaching and support staff at the coalface are equipped with the skills and tools needed to adequately identify and respond to mental ill-health;
- offering short-term counselling and related support; and
- delivering activities and programs that provide opportunities for students to develop transferable personal skills to support their mental health, self care, well-being and academic progress.

We acknowledge that the onset of mental illness peaks in adolescence and early adulthood when a young person may be entering higher education, perhaps living away from home for the first time and learning to become financially independent. Education providers therefore play a critical role in helping to raise awareness, identify, prevent and assist the treatment of mental ill-health during this critical period. Mental ill-health at this time can compromise or prevent a student from attaining significant social, educational and employment milestones, and subsequently lead to years of lost productivity and economic

participation¹. Students with an experience of mental ill-health have also been shown to be more likely to exit their course early.² This can have a detrimental impact on future mental health and education and employment outcomes.

Importantly, it should be recognised that successful participation in tertiary education – in terms of student experience and course completion – has been shown to be a protective factor for mental health,³ and importantly this effect may be more marked among those from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁴ Therefore, providing adequate mental health awareness, prevention, support services and self-management skills is critical to limit the impact of mental health problems in the community as well as to enhance productivity and participation directly.

Navitas acknowledges that while attention on acute services and suicide prevention is critical and warranted, so too is a focus on supporting people to develop self-management skills that ensure their future productivity and ongoing workforce participation. To that end, SAE Creative Media Institute (SAE) – which forms part of Navitas – has embedded a Transferable Skills Framework into its curriculum which enables students to develop metacognitive (e.g. problem-solving), interpersonal and intrapersonal skills throughout the course of their studies.

Workforce development

Navitas believes that workforce training and development is critical to improving mental health outcomes, both in terms of equipping staff with tools and skills to identify and respond to mental ill-health, and helping staff prevent, identify and/or seek treatment for their own mental ill-health.

At Navitas, one way we support workforce health and wellbeing is by providing staff and their immediate families with access to a free, confidential 24/7 counselling service to assist with personal, family or work issues. We have also engaged clinical psychologists to deliver mental health awareness training for more

¹ Leach, L. S., & Butterworth, P. (2012). The effect of early onset common mental disorders on educational attainment in Australia. *Psychiatry Research*, 199(1), 51-57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2012.03.040>

² Carter, M. A., & Goldie, D. (2017). Educational media: Potential impacts on tertiary students' mental health. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 3(3), 61-88. Retrieved from <http://www.ijicc.net/>

³ Soydan, A. S. 2004. Supported education: A portrait of a psychiatric rehabilitation intervention. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*, 7(3), 227-248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487760490884531>

⁴ Bauldry, S. (2015). Variation in the Protective Effect of Higher Education against Depression. *Society and Mental Health*, 5(2), 145-161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869314564399>

than 300 staff, recognising early intervention is an important factor in achieving positive mental health outcomes. Further, Navitas regularly participates in and facilitates activity challenges to encourage physical activity, which is supported by research as having a positive impact on mental health factors such as anxiety, depression and sleep.

Teaching and administrative staff must be appropriately trained and supported to deliver a stepped care model in which they can identify and administer mental health first aid throughout the student's journey, and refer students to specialists as appropriate (*see Case Study 3: Accidental Counsellor workforce training*). It is also critical that mental health specialists within and outside educational institutions are skilled and experienced in not only treating underlying conditions, but assisting students with daily functions that will ensure their active participation in social and economic pursuits.

Case studies in mental health

Case Study 1: A holistic approach to onsite mental health support

In 2016, two Navitas institutions – SAE and the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP) – teamed up to launch a unique counselling service for creative media students. Today, this free, on-campus and remote Student Counselling Placement Program is delivering critical support services to more than 160 students at SAE Creative Media Institute campuses across Australia.

The collaborative initiative was successfully piloted at the SAE Brisbane campus, with almost 90 percent of respondents saying it was beneficial to have ACAP student counsellors onsite. The initiative was identified as a significant component to supporting student success and rolled out later that year across all six Australian SAE campuses.

In the program, ACAP Student Counsellors deliver confidential, one-hour counselling sessions to SAE students. Much of the therapeutic work is short-term and is often focused on addressing course-related difficulties such as workload stress and anxiety. Students are also taught coping skills to help manage the academic and personal pressures relating to their studies. The counselling service also addresses broader issues such as relationship difficulties, trauma and crisis, depression, anxiety, body image and sexuality.

The ACAP students work from their local SAE campus, under the supervision of a Clinical Supervisor and Counsellor who monitors cases and provides guidance.

Complementing this project are the following initiatives and services developed for students at SAE:

- Student Access Plan that is available to all SAE students with disabilities – providing a personalised plan that becomes part of each student’s successful journey to graduation
- Student Services Advisers on each campus to provide support for academic and welfare issues
- Implementation of Initial Consultations for students, creating opportunity for early ‘touch point’ for students to access a support person and be triaged to an appropriate support person
- The delivery of sexual assault and harassment training and the establishment of a First Responder Network
- Mental health literacy training for academic and administrative staff to ensure a holistic, informed, whole-campus response to student mental health
- Calendar of events at each Australian campus to create opportunities for student engagement and promote a sense of belonging and inclusivity
- Self-care program pilot which focuses on one aspect of self care for students each week.

Testament to the success of SAE’s mental health and wellbeing initiatives, research conducted by La Trobe University in 2018 reports that SAE students have above-average performance within the disabilities equity group (including mental health) compared to other non-university higher education institutions. This outcome demonstrates the potential for onsite mental health support to improve productivity and participation by enhancing learning outcomes for students experiencing mental ill-health.

Case Study 2: Accidental Counsellor workforce training

Navitas delivers pathway and other tertiary programs to tens of thousands of international students each year. These students often face unique challenges such as social isolation, language barriers, the need to work part-time and intense pressure to study and succeed. In many instances, these same students may also feel shame about seeking professional help and/or confusion about how to navigate the mental health system in Australia.⁵

⁵ Health and Well-Being of International Students, and Comparison with Domestic Students, in Tasmania, Australia International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 2018, 15, 1147

As a steering committee contributor to English Australia's [Guide to Best Practice in International Student Mental Health 2018](#), Navitas acknowledges the need to develop tailored solutions to tackle the significant prevalence of mental ill-health among international students.

Among these solutions is a training program developed by ACAP, the 'Accidental Counsellor', which aims to help teachers of international students effectively recognise and respond to mental ill-health in the classroom. The program has been piloted with academic staff at two Australian Navitas pathway colleges – La Trobe College and Griffith College – and delivered to Navitas international education agents.

While Accidental Counsellor programs are not unique to Navitas, it is the bespoke nature of the training that is key to its success. For example, for Navitas international education agents, training is focused on how to support students who present with issues such as anxiety depression, self-harm or suicide. Attendees are provided with tools such as an Emergency Contact Guide which supports the triage of these vulnerable students. Training at La Trobe College, however, is focused on how staff can manage racial discrimination or support students after tragic events, such as the suicide of a classmate.

Navitas believes that workforce development is critical to improving the mental health of students, and that staff at the coalface should be equipped with the skills needed to administer mental health first aid throughout a student's journey.

Case study 3: Community engagement and support for the LGBTI community

The international LGBTI student body makes up 10 percent of the total cohort of students studying in Australia each year.⁶ However, an overwhelming theme in studies of this issue show that there is a feeling of isolation and difficulty in finding a community of support amongst these students. This evidence suggests that there needs to be much stronger community engagement and support initiatives to enhance the international LGBTI student experience which creates a more inclusive environment.

⁶ National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2016

Teachers in particular need to understand that LGBTI issues are relevant to their students and that a discourse about homosexuality or queerness does not necessarily mean a discussion about sexual practices.

Support for the LGBTI community can be given and demonstrated in many ways. In 2019, ACAP became the first Independent Higher Education Provider to become a member of the *Pride In Diversity* not-for-profit program supporting all aspects of LGBTI workplace inclusion. It was a major step in the College's continued plans to ensure representation and support for staff and students in the LGBTI community. It is particularly relevant given ACAP, as a provider of applied psychology training, is responsible for training a workforce that is intimately involved in supporting the mental health, wellbeing and ambitions of people from diverse walks of life.

Navitas English, which delivers English language courses to more than 9,000 students, has also taken active steps to support the needs of its LGBTI community, establishing the 'Rainbow Hub' for international students who are based in Brisbane. Headed by the Navitas English Centre Manager and Director of Studies, it hosts fortnightly sessions that aim to empower and support the international queer community. Students can meet, socialise and find support they need to settle in to their new home through workshops, discussions and special guest events.

These types of grass-roots, community-based initiatives are critical to help ensure the mental health and wellbeing of students in a friendly, open and non-threatening way.

Case study 4: Supporting the well-being of school teachers

The Australian School of Applied Management (ASAM), which forms part of Navitas, auspices the National Excellence in School Leadership (NESLI) initiative that works to enhance the skills and wellbeing of school principals and teaching staff across the Australian K-12 education system.

In 2018, NESLI partnered with the Northern Territory Department of Education to deliver its [Principals Wellbeing Forum](#) to more than 60 school principals across the territory, and implement NESLI's [Staff Wellbeing Toolkit](#) in all government schools, territory-wide. The only program of its kind in Australia, the toolkit, which has been delivered to more than 7,000 educators across the country, helps individuals to proactively manage their own wellbeing and provides strategies for professional communities to better understand and support each other. It has also been adopted by education systems in Finland and New Zealand. Both the toolkit and wellbeing program are informed by the Australian Principal Health and

Wellbeing Survey that shines the spotlight on the increasing duress experienced by school leaders on a daily basis.

This partnership demonstrates the potential application of digital learning interventions to address a chronic issue of low levels of staff wellbeing within schools, to safeguard personal health and to help create a school culture that is more conducive to the optimal wellbeing of students and staff. Navitas, through NESLI, recognises that the wellbeing and effectiveness of school leaders is inextricably linked to the health, wellbeing and performance of wider school communities and ultimately all students.

Future-focused strategies and initiatives

Navitas advocates that, at both a systemic level in the education and training sector and at an institutional level, there is significantly more than can be done to improve social and economic participation by supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff. This includes:

- Creating more touch points for support as early as possible in the student experience – and resourcing early intervention and prevention
- Providing more resources for international students, including mental health and well-being orientation packs
- Creating and resourcing more opportunities for peer support, engagement and mentorship
- Engaging alumni and industry experts earlier in the student lifecycle to inspire students
- Increasing and improving mental health literacy and understanding for all students and staff to ensure a holistic approach to wellbeing
- Creating more opportunity for physically engaging activities within student services (based on research that links physical activity with mental health and wellbeing)
- Providing more focused support for particular population sub-groups that are at higher risk of mental ill-health (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people residing in remote areas, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, newly arrived migrants and refugees)
- Creating and supporting more informal and formal partnerships with mental health services in the community
- Ensuring an appropriate workforce mix to support a model of stepped care, with a hierarchy of interventions
- Developing a specialist mental health workforce that is adequately trained to both treat underlying conditions and support improvements in daily function and productivity
- Improving indicators to monitor mental health outcomes.

Navitas believes that Australian governments – federal and state – also have a key role to play in supporting the education sector to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff by:

- Developing a holistic framework to help guide tertiary education providers in developing, implementing and resourcing mental health policies that will deliver the best results for students, staff and the broader community and economy
- Providing funding to develop and deliver best practice mental health initiatives specific to the education sector
- Encouraging social participation and inclusion to support students at higher risk of mental ill-health
- Facilitating and sponsoring partnerships between education providers and primary care networks in the community to ensure promotion of – and access to – the appropriate mental health services
- Making government-funded mental health support more accessible (e.g. The Better Access initiative is often difficult for students to access due to fees and long waiting lists)
- Responding to the findings and recommendations outlined in research publications such as the Guide to Best Practice in International Student Mental Health 2018
- Supporting early stage mental health literacy (e.g. through educating parents and children at an earlier stage of their educational development)
- Making mental health literacy programs more accessible in remote and rural locations
- Undertaking research to understand the effectiveness of embedding mental health into educational curricula.

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