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# Students' Mental Wellbeing in Universities Located in Melbourne

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*Worcester Polytechnic Institute*

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## **Students' Mental Wellbeing in Universities Located in Melbourne**

Understanding Students Access to and Perception of the Mental Health Services

Provided by their Universities in Melbourne

An Interactive Qualifying Project proposal to be submitted to the faculty of  
Worcester Polytechnic Institute in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Science

Submitted by: Anabella Isaro

Submitted to: Professor McCauley

Professor Michalson

May 3, 2017

## ABSTRACT

This report examines some of the barriers students face in accessing mental health services at their universities. The goal of this project is to understand the intervention plans, initiatives and services implemented by different bodies on university campuses to support university students' mental well-being and evaluate the students' perception of seeking mental health care. From my research I developed a recommendation that aimed to bridge the gap between the services being provided to the students and students' access to those services.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the guidance and support of several people that I would like to acknowledge. First and foremost, I would like to thank all the university students and counselors that volunteered their time to participated in the research, I would also like to thank my project advisors, Professor Stephen McCauley and Professor William Michalson, for giving me guidance throughout my project. I would also like to acknowledge Colleen Callahan-Panday my mentor for the guidance and support throughout my time in Australia. Next I would like to thank Brenda and all the librarians at the City Library for providing me with my research resources and being so friendly. Lastly I would like to thank my sister, friends, and roommates for the moral support and making my time in Australia life changing.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## *BACKGROUND*

In Australia the prevalence of mental health challenges among university students is on the rise. Universities across Australia have implemented various mechanisms to support students mental well-being. Subsequently, the Australia government has implement various policies to encourage universities to reinforce an environment that is supportive of the students' mental well-being. Institutions have also invested in research to provide information that addresses the problem of increased incidences of mental health challenges on university campuses.

Some of the research sheds light on the common mental health challenges students face. The two most common mental health challenges students experience were identified: depression, which is a mental health challenges that is characterized by extreme sadness and despair, and anxiety which is characterized by a feeling of worry. Substantial evidence from the research suggested that if mental health challenges are not addressed one of the reciprocating effects among university student was the tendency of students to be suicidal as their mental health challenges become more severe.

University students are at risk of having mental health challenges on campus. Some of the factors that were identified as contributing to increased incidences of mental health challenges included the financial responsibilities that students have in order to afford their education. Additionally, university workloads such as assignments and finals proved to also be contributing to the psychological distress among university student.

Even though there is the prevalence of mental health challenges among university students, utilization of mental health services provided by their institution is low. Stigma was one of the most highlighted factors that prevented students from seeking mental health services. International students in particular are more affected by the stigma that prevented them from accessing mental health services even though studies have shown that due to an unfamiliar environment international students reside in they are more at risk compared to other students to experience mental health challenges.

### *METHODOLOGY*

My project goal was to understand students' access to and perception of mental health services provided by their universities in Melbourne. To accomplish this my mission was to develop key objectives that were completed.

1. Understand the intervention plans, initiatives, and services implemented by various bodies on university campuses to help improve and maintain students mental well-being.
2. Evaluate university students' perceptions towards seeking mental health care and assess their awareness of the existing mental health services offered by their institutions.

My work was completed over a six-week period, which consisted of two phases: (1) With the goal of conducting interviews with university counselors; I contacted several counseling services to schedule interviews where I was able to schedule 3 in-person interviews with university counselors at three different universities. I visited their university campuses and conducted a 20 – 30 minute interviews, after which I analyzed

and reported on the data collected. (2) Additionally with the main goal of conducting student survey, I researched on social media various pages or organizations where university students in Melbourne are members. I then contacted the organizations and individual students to gauge their interest in the study and help distribute and/or participate in the study. I then collected and analyzed data from a sample size of 53 university students who participated in the survey.

### *FINDINGS*

Interviews with university counsellors help answer our two main research questions: what resource that are available to students to support students' mental well-being and what challenged are faced by these services. From my interviews I found that all the three universities have a common goal to support students maintaining and improving their mental well-being and they have taken several steps to ensure that students have all the resources necessary to maintain their mental well-being. Some of those services included centralized counselling services, ancillary mental health programs and skilled based training. However, these counselling centers face some challenges where delivering their services. The main challenge that these centers face is the low utilization and attendance of the services and programs they provide.

From the survey university students, my main research questions were what are the common perceptions students have towards seeking mental health care and what is their awareness of the services available to them. Some of the most important finding that were highlighted in the survey was that many students think their mental health is important, however many were reluctant to seek out mental health care even though they thought that their mental well-being was at risk and other were not aware of how

they care seek out mental health care from there universities. From the data collected it showed that there are some factors or barriers that prevent students from seeking help. Many students' thought that their universities do not advertise their services and hence students are not aware of them, others thought that they would be judged by their peers and family for seeking out mental health care and many more thought that the services and resources were not enough or available when needed.

### *CONCLUSION*

While most universities in Australia offer mental health services to their students, access to the services is limited. Interviewing university counselors highlighted the main challenge of low utilization of resources provided by the universities. Additionally, surveying students highlighted some of the factors that contribute to the low utilization of those resource by the students. From my research I concluded that the low utilization of the resources lies in the fact that students do not not know about the resources available to them. It is important for universities to provide information on how to access mental health services and find better effective mechanism of advertising their resources. University students need to seek out all the necessary information of how to seek help and take the main responsibility of utilizing the resources available to them.



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Mental health services in Australia play an essential role in supporting individuals to address their mental health challenges. Without accessing mental health services individuals are left vulnerable without a support system. The 2007 national mental health survey gathered data on access to mental health services in Australia and it estimated that only 35% of the people who experienced mental health challenges sought mental health support (Slade et al. 2009).

University students are a high-risk demographic in terms of mental well-being and intervention plans need to be implemented by universities to protect students' mental wellbeing (Leahy et al. 2010). Minto Felix, the co-founder of the Australians for Mental Health campaign, said "In Australia, even less is known about the mental health policies and models of care that are at work within our universities." (Felix, 2017). Similarly, a national mental health summit was held in Melbourne to prompt universities and other tertiary institutions to take action on their ethical obligations of supporting their students' mental health needs (Norton et al, 2013). However, as the prevalence of mental health challenges among university students has raised public concerns about what intervention plans universities have implemented to address the issue, access of mental health services by students remains a topic that is under-explored.

As more light is shed on the mental health challenges that exist on university campuses, many Australian universities have responded by exploring different techniques to address the issue. Some of those techniques include providing free counselling services, introducing various mental health programs, and supporting other techniques that address their students' mental health needs (Norton, 2013). The

Australian government and other private sector institutions have also invested in research, programs, services, and summits to support universities to introduce intervention plans, policies, initiative and services that address the mental health needs of their students (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016).

Yet, in spite of efforts to help support students' mental health, the persistent reports on the reoccurrence of mental health challenges on university campuses suggest that the utilization and attendance rate of services and programs offered by universities needs to be examined. Few studies have looked carefully into the barriers that exist that hold back students from accessing services provided by their universities.

Understanding the different mental health challenges students face, the factors that contribute to rising incidents of mental health challenges on university campuses, the various intervention plans put in place by different bodies, and the barriers that stand in the way of students accessing those services will provide the necessary data to better understand the social problem.

The goal of this project is to understand students' perceptions in seeking mental health care and their awareness of the services available to them at universities located in Melbourne. To implement this study, two objectives have been put in place. First, I seek to understand the intervention plans and initiatives implemented by various bodies on university campuses and assess the services those bodies provide to the students. Second, I evaluated university students' perceptions towards seeking mental health care and assessed their awareness of the existing mental health services offered by their institutions. The information generated from this study could inform on the status quo of student's access to mental health services.

## 2 BACKGROUND

Despite the global efforts put in place to address the prevalence of mental health challenges among university students, a growing pool of evidence justifies the persistent public concern of the students' mental wellbeing (Field et al, 2015). Subsequently, researchers have provided significant literature in the efforts to evaluate and analyze mental health challenges among university students. This chapter utilizes the literature on the different mental health challenges faced by the students, the factors that contribute to the rise of incidences of the mental health challenges on university campuses, the intervention plans and initiatives taken by various bodies to support the mental wellbeing of university students in Australia, and the barriers preventing students from seeking mental health care to help understand and examine the prevalence of mental health challenges among university students.

### 2.1 PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

The international community has acknowledged the vital importance of university students' mental wellbeing (Stallman, 2010). Reacting to this, the Australian vice-chancellors' committee (AV-CC) has instituted standard codes of ethics all Australian universities should follow to ensure the students' mental wellbeing. Section 9.2 of the code of ethics document states that universities should provide mental health supporting services including free counselling services to all university students. In response, all universities in Australia provide free university administered or funded counselling services and other support services to the students (Field et al, 2014).

However, the prevalence of mental health challenges among university student is still a national concern. A study done at the University of Adelaide found that 48% of a group of 955 university students exhibited mental health challenges (Leahy et al, 2010). In comparison to the general population, there are higher rates of occurrence of mental health challenges among university students (Stallman 2010). Various bodies have continued to argue for universities to establish strategies that support their students mental well being. However, as important as counselling services and other support services are, they are deficient on their own to adequately support the student mental well-being (Field et al,2014b). Students need to utilize those services to enable the mental health services support their mental well-being.

## 2.2 THE COMMON MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health diagnoses among university students. A study conducted at Adelaide University showed that university students are four times more likely to feel anxious or depressed compared to other people their age group (Collins, 2010). Similarly, in a study conducted by Eisenberg on students' mental health in universities around the United States, Eisenberg found that depression and anxiety are the most common mental health disorders on college campuses in the United States (Eisenberg, 2007). The study found that 13.0% and 15.6% of graduate and undergraduate students respectively reported to have suffered from anxiety or depression disorders (Eisenberg, 2007); the same study also suggest that these common mental health challenges can result one being suicidal. A study done at Adelaide university found that 30% of the students who had participated in the study reported to have had suicidal thought. The prevalence of anxiety and depressive

disorders suggest that these common disorders and the related effects be studied separately to present an understanding why they are common on university campuses.

### 2.2.1 DEPRESSION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Depression is one of the leading mental health disorders on university campuses. The Australian Bureau of Statistic conducted a nation mental health survey and found that one in sixteen young Australians aged between 16- 24 had demonstrated signs of depression (ABS, 2008); an age group where the majority are enrolled in tertiary education. Depression is a mental health illness that is characterized by periods of extreme sadness and despair and it often involves loss interest in activities that one would otherwise enjoy (Headspace, 2011). There are many types of depression but there are two major types of depression that are prevalent among university students.

The first major type is depression is clinical depression, which is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain where changes in levels of neurochemicals and hormones cause problems in the brain function leading to persistent feeling of sadness (SANE, 2016). The second major type of depression is situation depression, a form of depression that occurs in the aftermath of traumatic life changes or other unusually stressful situations. University students are more vulnerable to these types of depression as they go through a period of both personal and environmental change. Many students move away from their homes to live on university campuses or on their own and these major changes in their live make students vulnerable may cause depression especially if they struggle to adjust to their new environment.

### 2.2.2 ANXIETY AMOING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Anxiety is a mental health challenge characterized by feelings of worry that are strong enough to disrupt and interfere with one's daily activities (Beyond Blue, 2016). In the same national mental health survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), ABS found that 1 in 6 young Australians aged between 16 – 24 had shown signs of anxiety in the year 2007 (ABS, 2008). Anxiety is in second place to depression in the most common mental challenges students face. There are different types of anxiety symptoms but they are often categorized under the three types of symptoms.

The first category of symptoms is physical which is characterized by changes in the functioning of one's body, such as racing of the heart or tightening of the chest. The second category is psychological where the changes are in one's mind, such as over thinking certain situations or being extremely nervous or worried under certain circumstances that you wouldn't otherwise worry or get nervous about. The third category is behavioral symptoms which are characterized by one changing certain habits or practices in their lives so that they avoid situations that make them feel nervous. Anxiety tends to be connected to stressful situations that make one nervous or worried such as huge project or final exams (Beyondblue, 2016). University students are vulnerable to feeling anxious on university campuses. Vukovic argues that Australian universities foster a culture of competition, that has resulted into alarming levels of anxiety as students worry and stress about there ability to succeed at university (Vukovic, 2006).

### 2.2.3 RELATED SUICAL INCIDENCES

In a newsletter by The Sydney Morning Herald titled *Action urged on mental health of Students as suicide rate rises*, the author reported that the suicide rate had risen to its highest level in 13 years among university students. As mental health challenges reach alarming levels among university students, suicidal thoughts and self-harm rates have subsequently risen. In a study conducted by Headspace, in the 2600 TAFE and university students that were surveyed, about 35 per cent said to have thought about self-harm or suicide (Vukovic, 2006). In 2015, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released a report on the causes of death in Australia for the year 2014. The proportion of death attributed to suicide varied greatly among age groups with a much greater percentage of the total cause of death attributed to suicide in younger age groups. The report showed that suicide accounted for a third of all deaths of 15 -24 year olds, and age where the majority are enrolled in tertiary education or universities. Universities have taken preventive measures such as suicide prevention sessions to support students who are having suicidal thoughts or having mental health crisis. An examination of Australian universities websites indicates many universities have a hotline that is available to students to call a university counselor at anytime in times of crisis.

### 2.3 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Financial stressors, academic workload, and social problems are some of the contributing factors that increase the level of mental health challenges among university campuses. University students go through major changes in both their personal and professional lives and some struggle to adjust to their new responsibilities (Threthowan, 2008). If one struggles to adjust to some of these major changes in their life, sometimes



those changes can be the very factors that disrupt their mental wellbeing. Exploring these factors that contribute to the prevalence of students' mental health challenges in depth enables one to have a better understanding of why mental health challenges are prevalent among university students.

### 2.3.1 FINANCIAL STRESSORS

University students come from different financial backgrounds and support their education in various ways. However, in a 2012 report by University Student Finances, the researchers found that two-thirds of the students who were enrolled in universities in Australia were living under that poverty line (Daniau, 2013). The report also showed that the financial stress that comes with university expenses distracts students' ability to study and excel in their academics as they worry about their financial situation and its impact. In a news report by the Independent magazine, the author reported that students who experience financial difficulties have increased chances of suffering a mental health illness. Many students have adjusted to their financial situations by working part-time as they study, however this sometimes distracts students from their academic responsibility. Many teachers have indeed reported that working while studying sometimes has a negative impact on students' performance (Robinson, 1999).

Despite universities effort to support students financially by giving them both student scholarships or student loans, Australian universities are still expensive and most of them require financial contribution from the students. In extreme cases students choose to opt out of school when they fail to meet university's financial requirements. University drop outs are at a new rise in Australia, with one third of students not completing they degree (Burke, 2017). Among other factors, an increased number of

university drop outs has been attributed to the financial stress that comes with going to university. This can cause significant stress for students as their future becomes even more unclear if they are faced with the possibility of having to drop out of school.

### 2.3.2 UNIVERSITY WORKLOAD

Assignments, exams, presentation and other school requirements are part of the daily responsibility of a university student. The ability to perform those responsibilities determines one grades and overall often determine the student's future career trajectory. This can cause a lot of stress for many students as they grapple to accomplish those responsibilities. Final exams in particular, form a critical junction where students experience an increase in workload and level of psychological distress tend to increase during the final exam period (Newman, 2010). Many universities have provided additional mental well-being services during this period such as meditation or yoga session to help students dealing with stress, but psychological distress among university students is still prevailing.

### 2.4 DEMOGRAPHICS AND THEIR RELATION

Many university campuses in Australia offer centralized counselling services. However, many students tend not to use those services. In general, young people tend not to seek help for their mental health challenges, even though they experience elevated levels of mental health challenges (Gulliver, 2012). Approximately only 18 to 34 percent of young adults seek professional help for their mental health problems. One of the factors that prevents students from seeking help, is the stigma surrounding seeking mental health care. Many people having mental health challenges, do not seek help because of stigma (Dubin, 2005). Even though international students are the most

at risk demographic to experience mental health challenges, international students are less likely to seek professional help in Australian universities compare to other students (Forbes-Mewett et al, 2008). This section will explore the stigmas surrounding seeking mental health care with a particular focus on the international students' demographics.

#### 2.4.1 STIGMA IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Australia is a host of many international students, who account for 24.3 per cent of the entire student population in Australian universities. Many of these international students are at an age where mental health challenges are likely to surface (Hickie, 2006). In a study conducted by Helen Forbes from Monash University and Anne-Maree Sawyer from La Trobe university, sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with international students' security and support services at an Australian university, participants reported that brought to light the alarming level of mental health challenges among international students (Forbes-Mewett, 2008).

International students are particularly a higher-risk demographic in terms of mental well-being on university campuses in Australia. They face many unique challenges that domestic students don't face and this might have an effect on their mental wellbeing (Forbes-Mewett, 2008). International students face many social challenges such having to adjust to a new culture or being so far away from home that many of them have reported suffering from homesickness (Forbes-Mewett, 2008). Financial stress is also another challenge that international student face, where international students pay 270 per cent more in tuition fees than domestic student in Australia (Yew, 2013). Despite all the challenges international students face, they are also the demographic that is least likely to seek professional help.

Stigma in the form of fear or shame is one of the reasons that international students are reluctant to seek help. Many international students come from cultures that consider mental health challenges as a sign of weakness or something to be ashamed of. In fact, some Chinese students admitted that counseling services would bring shame upon their parents and themselves (Snider 2001). The stigmas that international students have towards seeking mental health is one of the reason why international students do not seek professional help for their mental health problems even though many of them could benefit from using counselling services.

## 2.5 INTERVENTIONS AND INITIATIVES

As universities try to create an environment that is supportive of their students mental well-being, effective initiative plans have been and are being implement with the guideline provided by the government. This section focus on the intervention plans designed by the government to protect university students mental well-being and the initiatives taken by the universities in response to both the government request and the students' mental well-being needs.

### 2.5.1 NATIONAL BODIES

The Australian government and other public organizations have acknowledged the vital importance of university students' mental wellbeing (Norton, 2010). This is reflected in public policy and budget initiatives that focus on demystifying and de-stigmatizing mental health among Australian students. In August 2011, an inaugural national summit on mental health of tertiary students was held in Melbourne. This summit attracted over 200 delegates from almost every university in Australia and New Zealand, as well as Institutes of TAFE. The focus of the summit was to benchmark

concerns of mental health among tertiary students and to design a set of guideline institutional policies, programs and practices in Australia over the next five years that will improve mental health in tertiary institutions. Extensive research has also been conducted, with reports and guidelines that have been published by government organizations on how institutions could support students with mental health issues. The Australian New Zealand Student Support Association (ANSSA) has provided a standard guideline that institutions should follow to equip their students with an effective support system that helps students improve and maintain their mental well-being. One example of a standard guideline is the requirement of the number of counselors that should be available on university campuses, where they suggest that for every five thousand students there should be at least one university counselor.

## 2.5.2 UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONS

University institutions have encountered a responsibility to respond to their students' mental health, as incidences of mental health challenges among students arise (Norton, 2013). In response, institutions have experimented with different approaches with the purpose of creating an institutional culture that is supportive of the arising students' mental health needs. This is reflected in university policies and procedures that incorporate the needs of students and staff with mental illness or mental health difficulties. Universities have also provided services that support staff and students who experience mental illness and mental health difficulties such as university counselling centers, employee assistance programs, and access to safe havens for meditation or yoga class. Appendix III contains information on the different initiatives being taken by various universities in Melbourne to ensure student mental well-being.



### 3 METHODOLOGY

This project aims to understand students' attitudes in seeking mental health care and accessing mental health services in universities located in Victoria, Australia. The project will aim to achieve the following objectives.

- Understand the intervention plans and initiatives implemented by various bodies on university campuses in downtown Melbourne and identify the services those bodies provide to the students.
- Evaluate university students' attitudes towards seeking mental health care and assess their awareness of the existing mental health services offered by their institutions.

When these objectives are achieved, this research can later be used to recommend possible additional initiatives and intervention plans.

#### 3.1 FIRST OBJECTIVE

**Understand the intervention plans, initiatives, and services implemented by various bodies on university campuses to help improve and maintain students mental well-being.**

In recent years, many universities have acknowledged the importance of the mental well being of their students. This has been accompanied by various interventions and initiatives plans implemented by both public and private institutions. In order to understand and identify the intervention plans offered by these institutions the following research questions were investigated.

- What are the different mental health organizations, services, and events available to the students at specific universities in the CBD area?

- What various steps have been taken by these organizations to bring awareness to mental health care services?
- What external tools and resources are available to support students' mental well-being?
- What challenges are faced by these organizations in delivering mental health services to students and how can they be supported to improved student's mental health care?

Data was collected in the form of interviews with staff at student counselling centers. Student counselling centers at local universities were identified and selected to be contacted using their provided phone numbers on the universities' websites. During the phone call, I was able to schedule three in-person interview with counselors at three universities located in Melbourne. The interviews explored the research questions related to the services available to students and was also used to explore the appropriate steps forward in implementing a research design.

To increase participation and increase the validity of this study, the goal of the project was communicated to the participants at the start of the interview process and the results from this research will be made available to the participants for later use for those who requested. The interviewer communicated the oral consent statement and confidentiality agreement, which described that the participant's identity is to be revealed in this study only with the participant's approval. We also acquired verbal consent before conducting the interview. The data collected from the interviews was coded to find the common themes and will be used to draw conclusions about what is



being done by universities to support the mental wellbeing of their students.

Suggestions from the interviews were used to determine the implementation methods of the survey that is being conducted as part of objective two.

### 3.2 SECOND OBJECTIVE

**Evaluate university students' perceptions towards seeking mental health care and assess their awareness of the existing mental health services offered by their institutions.**

Due to the increase in the occurrence of mental health challenges on university campuses in Australia, it was important that this research explores students' attitudes towards seeking mental health care and evaluates their awareness of the resources and services available in universities to help them maintain their mental well-being. In order to accomplish this, I conducted a survey of students at universities in Melbourne. The survey was used to be used to shed light on students' attitudes toward seeking mental health care and their willingness to utilize existing services.

This research aimed at addressing is aiming at addressing the following questions:

- What are the various demographics that exist among the universities located in the CBD area?
- What are the common perceptions students have towards seeking mental health care in relation to their specific demographics?
- What is the awareness rate among students of available mental health services at the universities?

Data was collected in form of surveys that was sent out to university students located in Melbourne. I used simple random sampling where I students were selected randomly

from universities social media pages and were contacted individually to inquire if they were interested in taking part in the research. I implemented the survey using an online tool called Qualtrics and after students showed interest in the research a link to the Qualtrics survey was sent to them, with a brief overview of the research and the purpose of this study. The survey constituted of 28 questions and was distributed online via the identified social media such as Facebook. The sample size was 30 respondents and a total number of 56 participants were achieved, 50 of which were university students.

The data collected from the survey was analyzed using two different methods: close ended questions which were compiled using Qualtrics, and the opened ended question which were coded to analyze the common themes that exist in the responses. The data from the close ended question from the survey report is in Appendix A and the data from the open ended question from the survey report is in Appendix B. The compiled data was used to draw conclusions about student's perceptions towards seeking mental health care or utilizing mental health care services and their awareness of the available resources. Their confidential agreement was also communicated before they began to partake in the study. Additions their anonymity was highly reinforce and no identifying information was collected from the survey.

## 4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the research findings from interviews with university counsellors where data on the initiatives taken by institutions to provide services that support university students' mental well being. It will also present the findings that were collected from the surveys with the goal of examining the students' perception of and access to mental health services with a particular focus on their awareness of the services available to them.

### 4.1 COUNSELLOR INTERVIEWS

As stated above interviews with a university counsellor at three universities in Melbourne were conducted to gather information about the various services and programs available to students that help support their mental health. For confidentiality reasons the counselor asked not to reveal their identity or their institutions identity and in this research the universities will be referred to as university A, university B, and university C and the counselors at those universities will be referred to Mary, Jane and Betty respectively.

#### 4.1.1 COMMON GOALS BY UNIVERSITY COUNSELLING SERVICES

Counsellors described that their universities have taken the initiative to create an environment that is supportive of their students mental well being, by providing centralized counselling services, with the common goal of supporting students improve and maintain their mental health. Centralized counselling services provided trained professionals also know as counselors that are located on university campuses and their purposes is to provide a counselor to individuals or groups who assist them and

provides guidance on how to deal with both personal and academics difficulties that the students face. Most of these counselors conduct counselling sessions in person during the business hours, but there is always a counselor who is on a 24-hour phone call duty to be contacted by students in cases of emergency.

University counselors understand that students face many in challenges in their day to day life that may affect their ability to learn, hence counselling services have also made it their mission to provide or facilitate programs such as meditation, yoga and others, which will assist them manage those challenges by equipping them with different coping mechanism to use when dealing with difficulties. These ancillary well-being services help students maintain their mental-wellbeing and not necessary rely on counselling session to help them maintain their mental-wellbeing.

Additionally, counselling services have also taken preventive measures to ensure that students are not at risk of being in situations that might affect their mental wellbeing. They have worked with other departments on university campuses to create programs that provide skill based training on how to manage different situations and also be a resource to their fellow peers. The preventive measures include suicide prevention, sexual assault training and other skill-based training that will equip students with information they need to protect themselves.

#### 4.1.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY COUNSELLING SERVICES

Despite the counselling services efforts to provide the necessary resources to support students' mental wellbeing, attendance of those programs or services is relatively low on some universities. Counselling services have put an effort into encouraging students to utilize their services such as holding orientation session for first

year students to provide them the necessary information on how to seek help. Mary at university A said that they participate in a four-week orientation for first year students and other information session on campus, in which they provide information on how to get instant counselling support or book for an appointment. Yet, the attendance of counseling services at university A is still relative low with no waiting list. Some of the factors that Mary attributed to the low attendance was the living arrangements of students. Where the participation in mental health programs of students who live off campus is relatively low compared to those who live on campus. She said that students who live on campus are confined in the same environment are it makes them easy to reach, where the counselors co-ordinate with residential services department to come to the students' residence and hold information sessions.

At university B however, the utilization of the mental health services was significantly high in which they had a waiting list of two weeks for one to get an appointment. That was attributed to the number of counselors available to the students. Jane said that they follow the guidelines set by the Australia New Zealand Student Support Association known as ANSSA, where ANSSA recommend that there should be one counselor for every five thousand students. However, currently there is one counselor for every seven thousand students which is why there is a long waitlist. Jane also said that there is no correlation between the attendance of counselling services and other mental health programs they provide or facilitate, because some of mental health, sometimes get relatively low attendance.

Another common challenge all universities had was that many students wait to use the counselling services when there is a major crisis. Universities have tried to

eradicate this by encouraging peers and professors to recommend students who they think might need counselling services. The counselling services offer tips and guidelines on how to identify students that might need counselling services, university C in particular is trying to develop a program where they train students to be their peers support system. Betty said that they noticed that it was easier for students to seek help from their peers as opposed to a counselor. Which is why they want to develop a program where they train students on how they support their fellow students.

#### 4.1.3 OTHER INITIATIVE PLANS PROVIDED BY COUNSELLING SERVICES

Of the three universities that were interviewed most of them offered ancillary mental health services and training programs to help support their students' mental health. However, universities were exploring new mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of those programs. University A was exploring an option of peer to peer counselling, Mary said that they think peer to peer counseling will help students feel comfortable discussing their problems with their fellow students as opposed to a professional. This program has already begun its planning process and students have started signing up for training. This program however has hit a few patches because of legal reasons; Mary said that students are a conflict of interest when being their fellow students' counsellor and students are more likely to compromise the confidentiality of their fellow students. She said that they are still exploring other ways to make the peer to peer program effective.

#### 4.2 STUDENT SURVEY

Some of the most important findings from the survey that need to be highlighted are the students' perception in seeking mental health care and their awareness of the services

available to them. 42.86% of the students that participated in the study, indicated that their mental well-being is extremely or very important to them. However, 61.22% of the students that participated in the study do not know where to seek mental health care. Subsequently the majority of the students suggested that one of the barriers that exist when seeking mental health care services is that the services provided by universities are not well advertised hence students can't access the services if they don't know about them. Where of the students that participated in study, 77.78% had never accessed mental health care from their universities. One student suggested that university counselling centers should put flyers around campus advertising the services they provide so that students are know how to seek help. Below is Figure 1 that shows how students value their mental well-being, Figure 2 that shows how many had accessed mental health service and Figure 3 that shows their awareness of the services they provide.

Figure 1: How important is mental well-being to students

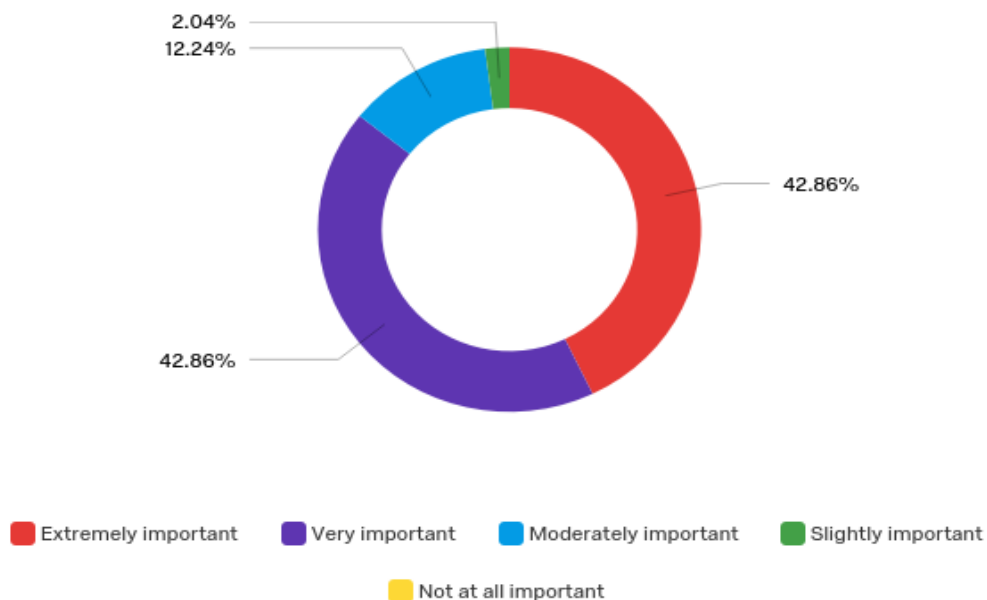


Figure 2: How many students had accessed university mental health services

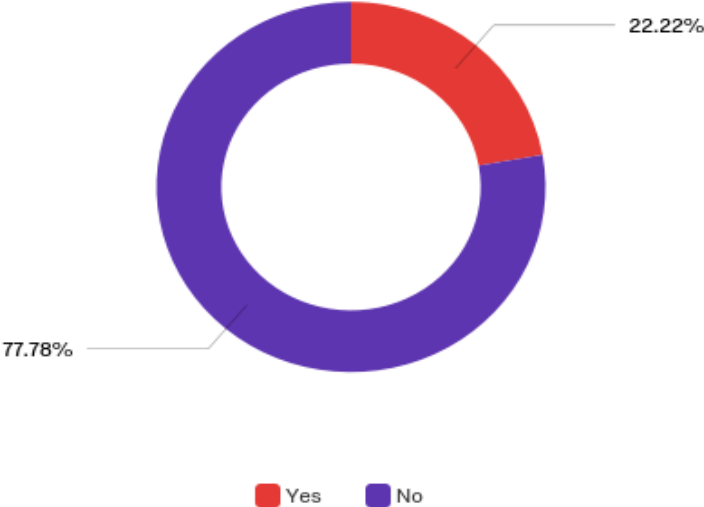
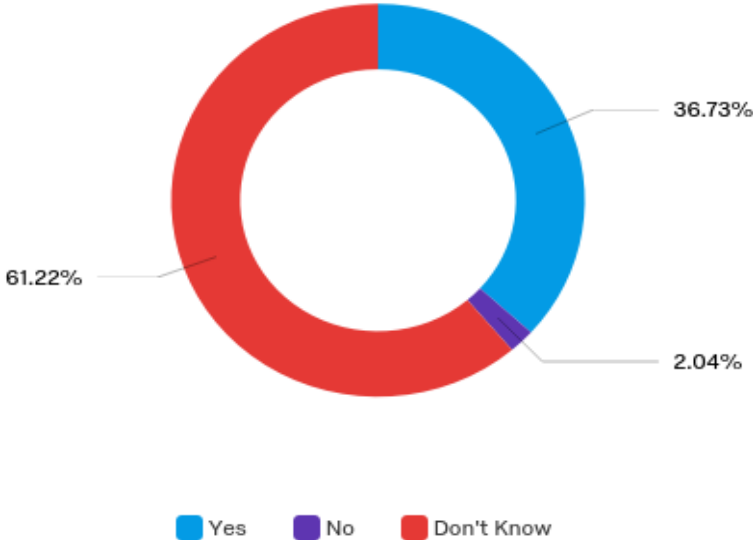


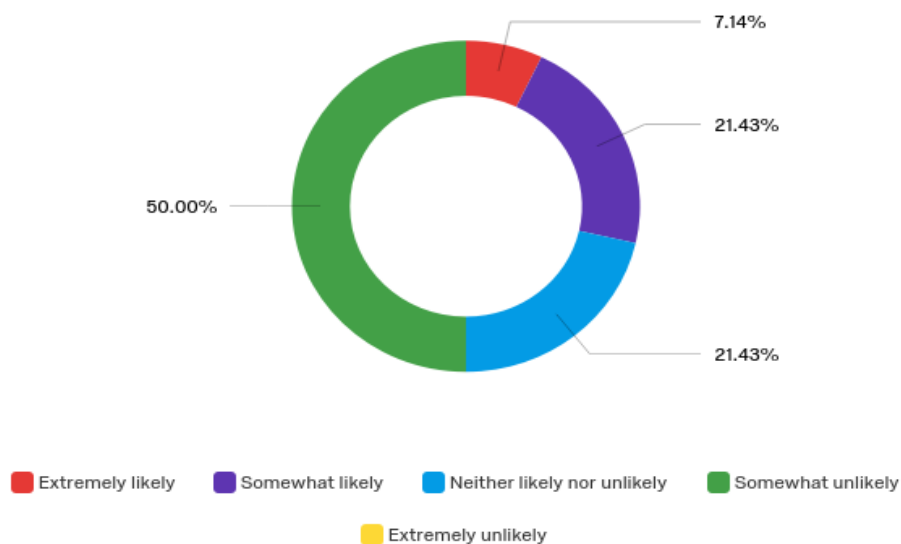
Figure 3: How many students are aware of the services provided by their university





While the majority of the students that participated in the study care about their mental well-being, university students do not take the first steps in seeking out mental health care. When asked how likely they were to seek out counseling services the majority of responses seemed to show that students are rather reluctant to seek out mental health services even if they were having mental health challenges. 50% said it was somewhat unlikely that they would seek out mental health services even if their mental wellbeing was at risk. One of the other barriers that prevents students from seeking mental health care is the stigma that student might have. Two students reported that they would not want their peers to find out that they were seeking mental health, another student also said that if her/his parents were to find out they would think she/he is overreacting. Some of these stigmas are some of the barriers that might have contributed to the decreased likelihood of seeking mental health care even though students believe they needed it. Figure 4 shows how likely students are to seek out mental health care.

Figure 4. How likely students are to seek mental health care from their universities



Some students also seemed to question the effectiveness of the resources provided. Even though the majority of those who had access mental health care seemed to think they were really helpful, some students seemed to think that the resources are not sufficient or available when the students' want them so the result into not accessing the services. One student said that they think if they were to call the counselling service at any point they would not be available to help, and would probably make them wait.

## 5 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

One of the main over-arching themes that emerged from this research is that there is a gap between the services that are being provided on university campuses and student's access to those services. Some of the dynamics that exist is that one of the challenges university counselors face is that students are not utilizing the services they provide and there is low attendance of the mental health programs they facilitate. However, one of the issues students confront is the fact that they are not aware of those programs or services. University counselors need to find better ways to make themselves known and advertise their programs better. Subsequently a students' efforts in taking the first step in accessing those service or participating in the programs is required.

Another emerging theme is the services the universities provide. One of the challenges that one university I interviewed was facing was the fact that they didn't have enough resources to provide to the students. Even though universities are required by the government to provide a counselor for every 5000 students, some universities have one counselor for every 7000 students. A waitlist is inevitable in cases where the counselors are not available when students need them. Many students reported finding this a problem that prevented them from even seeking out mental health services since by the time they are able to schedule an appointment the students' will probably have found alternative solutions or the crisis will have significantly increased.

Universities do not just need to provide mental health services to the students; they need to provided effective mental health services, which includes being able to provide services to students when the students need them. One way universities can do

this is increase the number of counselors available to students, in that way students would not have to wait for when the next counselor is available.

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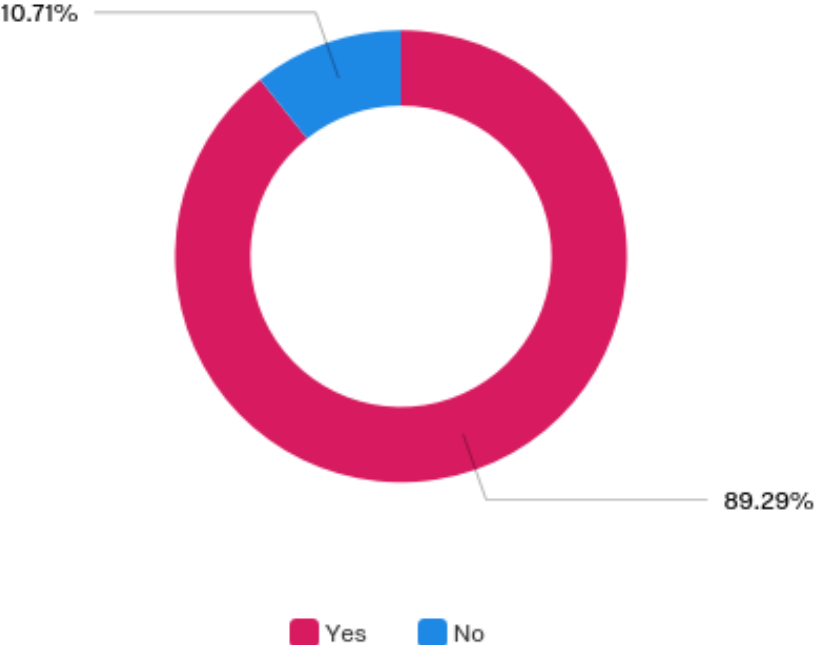
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7 APPENDICES

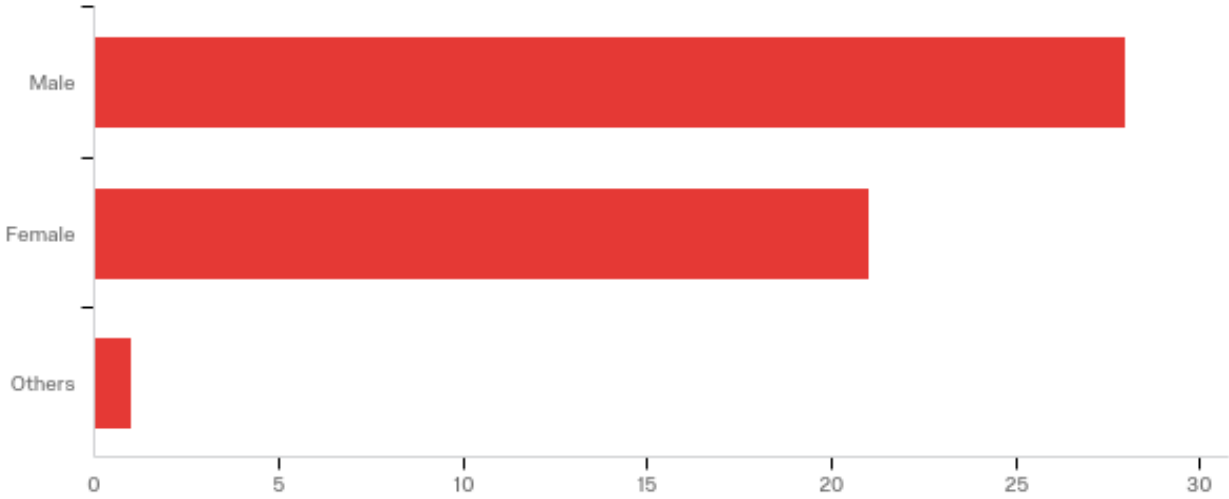
**Appendix A: University students close-ended responses**

Q2 - Are you a university student?



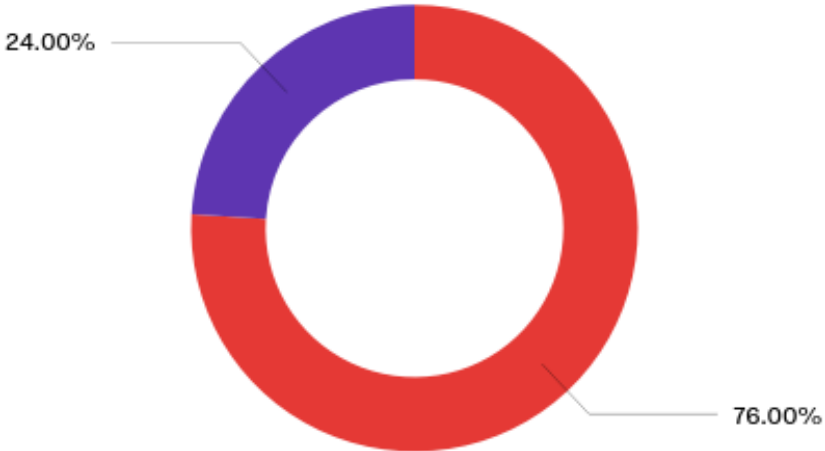
| # | Answer | %      | Count |
|---|--------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes    | 89.29% | 50    |
| 2 | No     | 10.71% | 6     |
|   | Total  | 100%   | 56    |

**Q3 - What is your gender?**





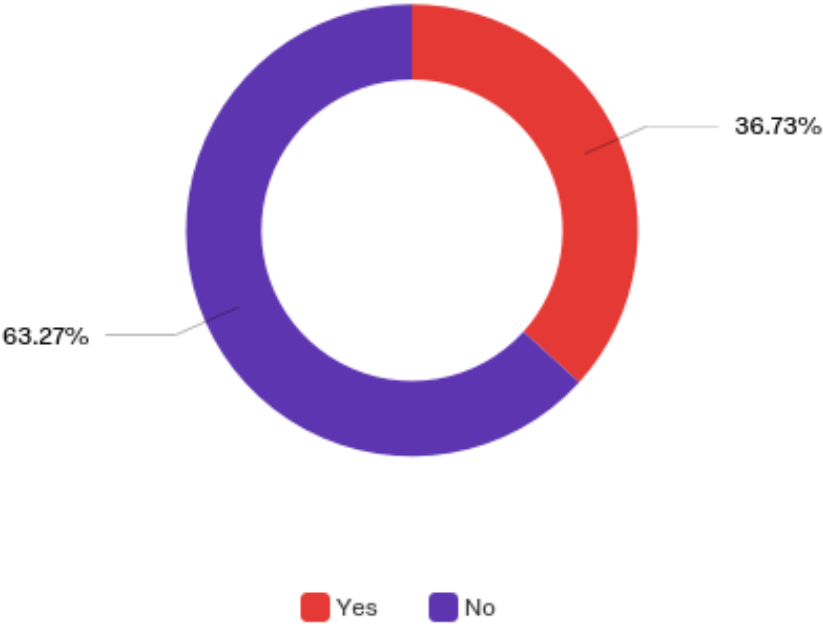
**Q4 - What is your age range?**



■ Below 16   
 ■ 17 - 25   
 ■ 25 - 35   
 ■ 35 -45   
 ■ Above 45

| # | Answer   | %      | Count |
|---|----------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Below 16 | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 2 | 17 - 25  | 76.00% | 38    |
| 3 | 25 - 35  | 24.00% | 12    |
| 4 | 35 -45   | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 5 | Above 45 | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total    | 100%   | 50    |

Q5 - Are you an international student?



| # | Answer | %      | Count |
|---|--------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes    | 36.73% | 18    |
| 2 | No     | 63.27% | 31    |
|   | Total  | 100%   | 49    |

**Q6 - What is your country of origin?**

What is your country of origin?

---

Pakistan

---

Tanzania

---

Zambia

---

Ghana

---

Indonesia

---

Nigeria

---

UK

---

Estonia

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China

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China

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Netherlands

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South sudan

---

England

---

Indonesia

---

England

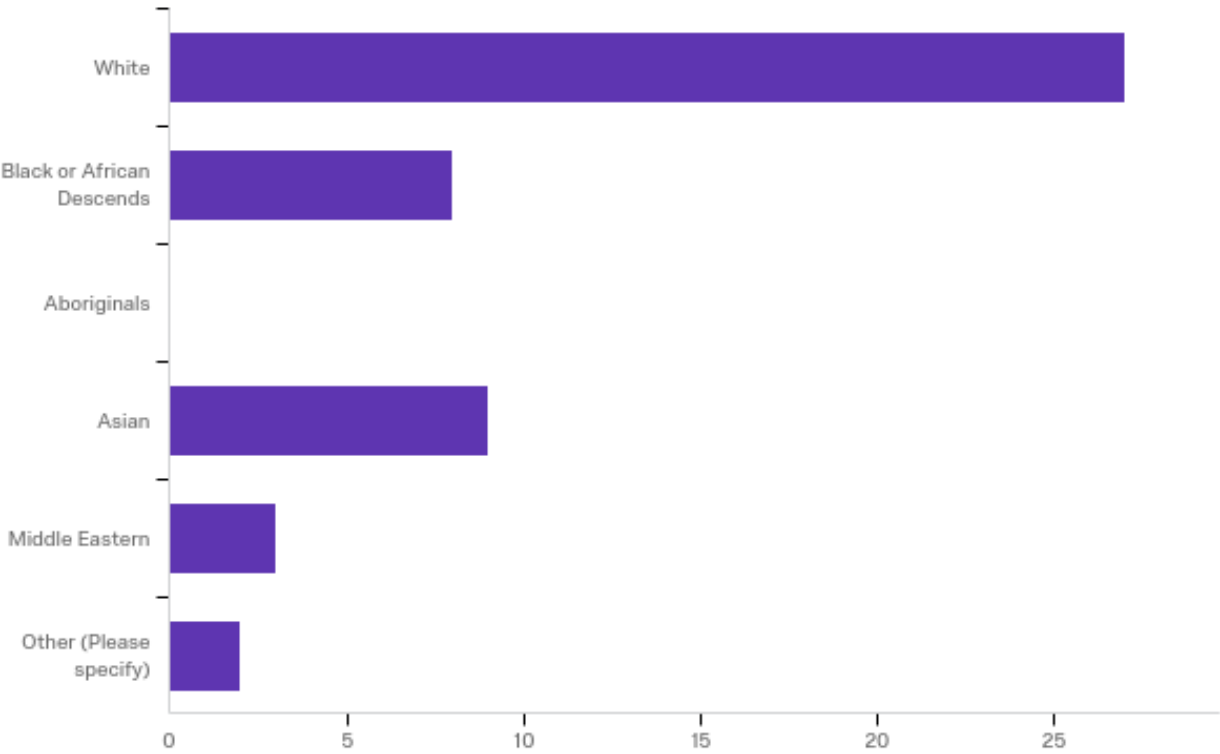
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Indonesia

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India

**Q7 - What is your ethnic background?**



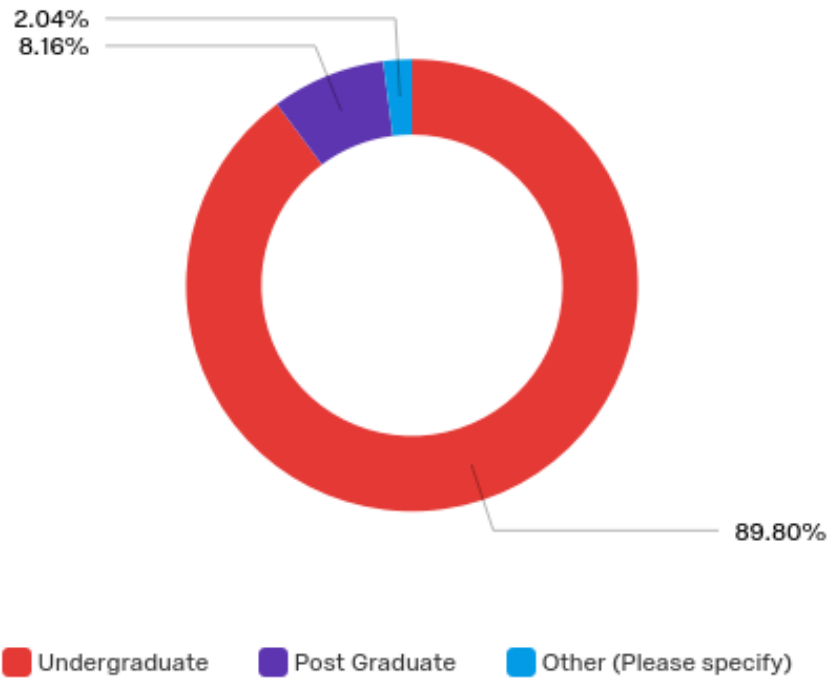
Other (Please specify)

Other (Please specify)

---

European

**Q8 - What is your degree Level?**



| # | Answer                 | %      | Count |
|---|------------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Undergraduate          | 89.80% | 44    |
| 2 | Post Graduate          | 8.16%  | 4     |
| 3 | Other (Please specify) | 2.04%  | 1     |
|   | Total                  | 100%   | 49    |

Other (Please specify)

Other (Please specify)

---

Advanced Diploma

### Q9 - What university do you attend?



| # | Answer                             | %      | Count |
|---|------------------------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Swinburne University of Technology | 20.41% | 10    |
| 2 | Monash University                  | 8.16%  | 4     |
| 3 | RMIT University                    | 20.41% | 10    |
| 4 | Victoria University                | 8.16%  | 4     |
| 5 | University of Melbourne            | 16.33% | 8     |
| 6 | Other (Please specify)             | 26.53% | 13    |
|   | Total                              | 100%   | 49    |

Other (Please specify)

Other (Please specify)

MIT

Deakin

Deakin

---

Deakin

---

Deakin

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Deakin

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La trobe

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Deakin University

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Deakin

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La Trobe

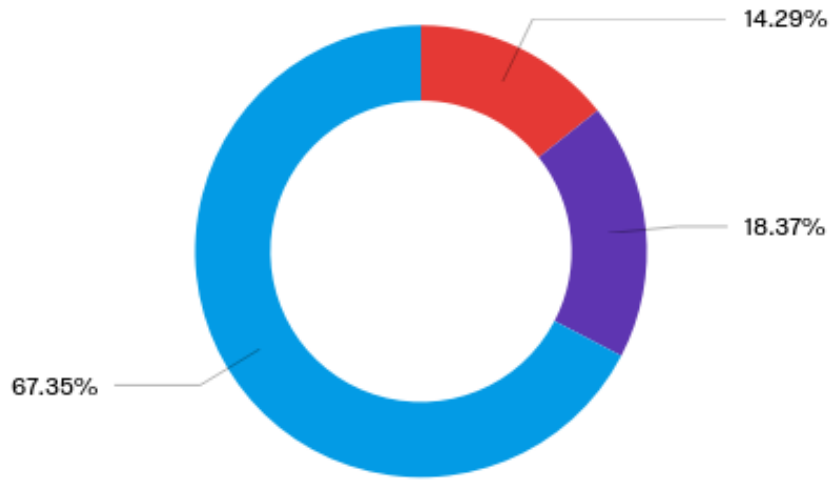
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Deakin

---

La Trobe University

**Q10 - Where do you reside during the school year?**

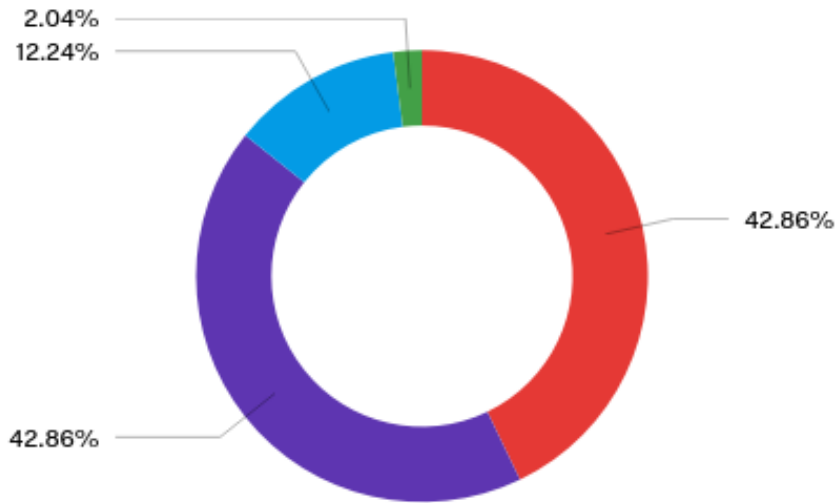


■ On campus    
 ■ Commute less than a mile away    
 ■ Commute more than a mile away

| # | Answer                        | %      | Count |
|---|-------------------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | On campus                     | 14.29% | 7     |
| 2 | Commute less than a mile away | 18.37% | 9     |
| 3 | Commute more than a mile away | 67.35% | 33    |
|   | Total                         | 100%   | 49    |



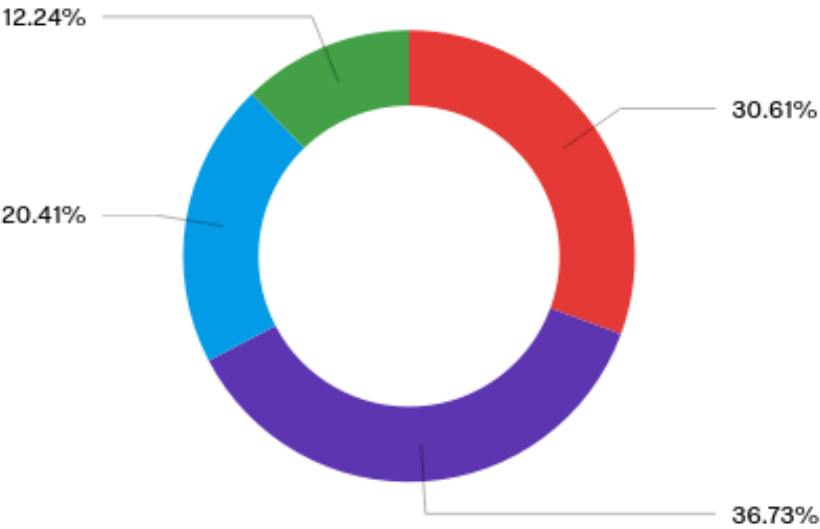
### Q11 - How important is your mental well-being?



■ Extremely important   
 ■ Very important   
 ■ Moderately important   
 ■ Slightly important  
■ Not at all important

| # | Answer               | %      | Count |
|---|----------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Extremely important  | 42.86% | 21    |
| 2 | Very important       | 42.86% | 21    |
| 3 | Moderately important | 12.24% | 6     |
| 4 | Slightly important   | 2.04%  | 1     |
| 5 | Not at all important | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total                | 100%   | 49    |

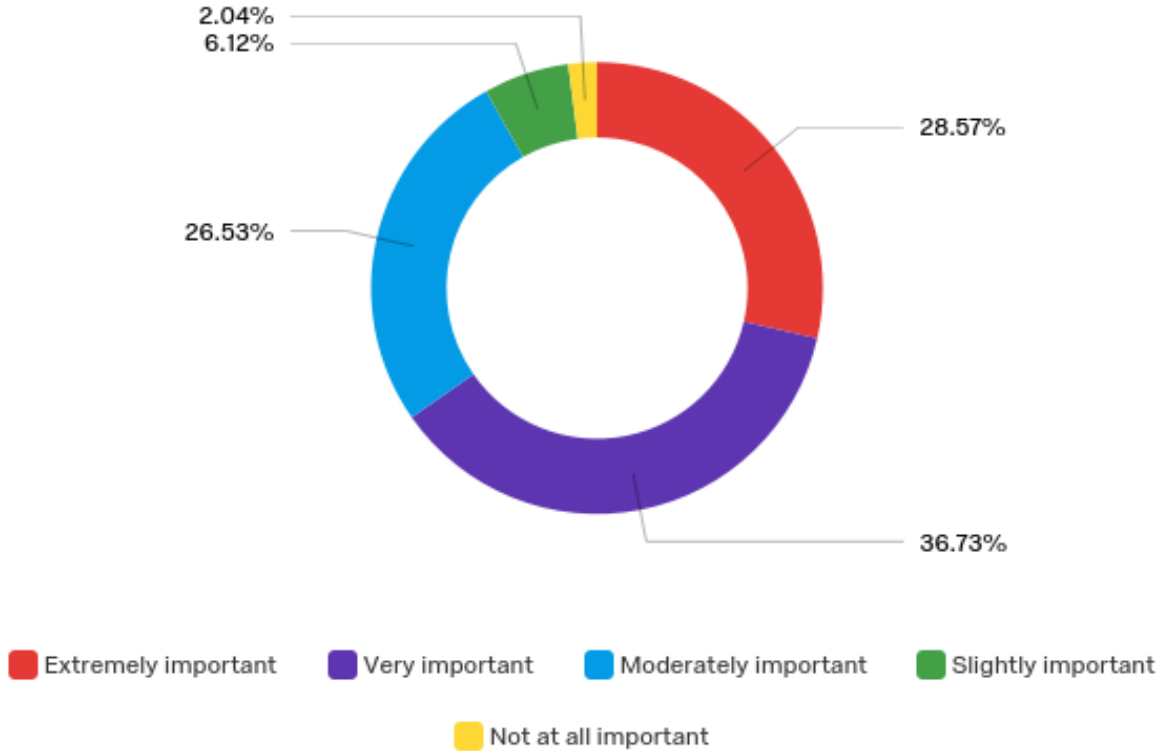
**Q12 - How important is it to you that your university offers information sessions, educational seminars, public lectures or panels related to mental well-being?**



■ Extremely important   
 ■ Very important   
 ■ Moderately important   
 ■ Slightly important  
■ Not at all important

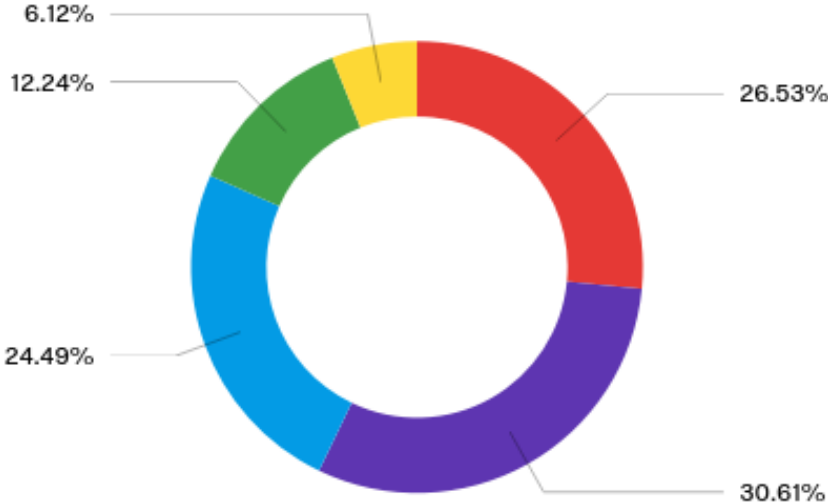
| # | Answer               | %      | Count |
|---|----------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Extremely important  | 30.61% | 15    |
| 2 | Very important       | 36.73% | 18    |
| 3 | Moderately important | 20.41% | 10    |
| 4 | Slightly important   | 12.24% | 6     |
| 5 | Not at all important | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total                | 100%   | 49    |

**Q13 - How important is it to you that your university offers information on the mental health services available on your campus?**



| # | Answer               | %      | Count |
|---|----------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Extremely important  | 28.57% | 14    |
| 2 | Very important       | 36.73% | 18    |
| 3 | Moderately important | 26.53% | 13    |
| 4 | Slightly important   | 6.12%  | 3     |
| 5 | Not at all important | 2.04%  | 1     |
|   | Total                | 100%   | 49    |

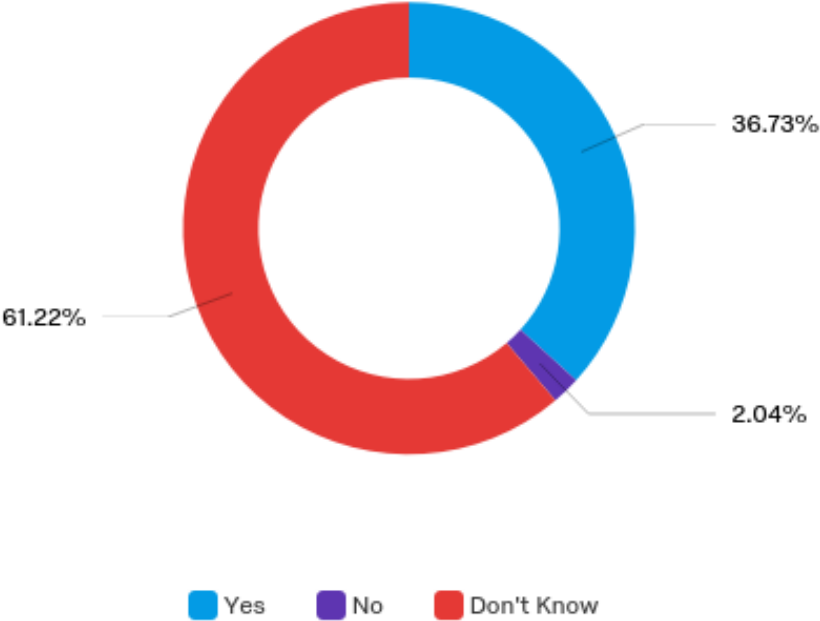
**Q14 - How important is it to you that your university funds or supports student organizations or peer-run groups that focus on mental well-being?**



■ Extremely important   
 ■ Very important   
 ■ Moderately important   
 ■ Slightly important  
■ Not at all important

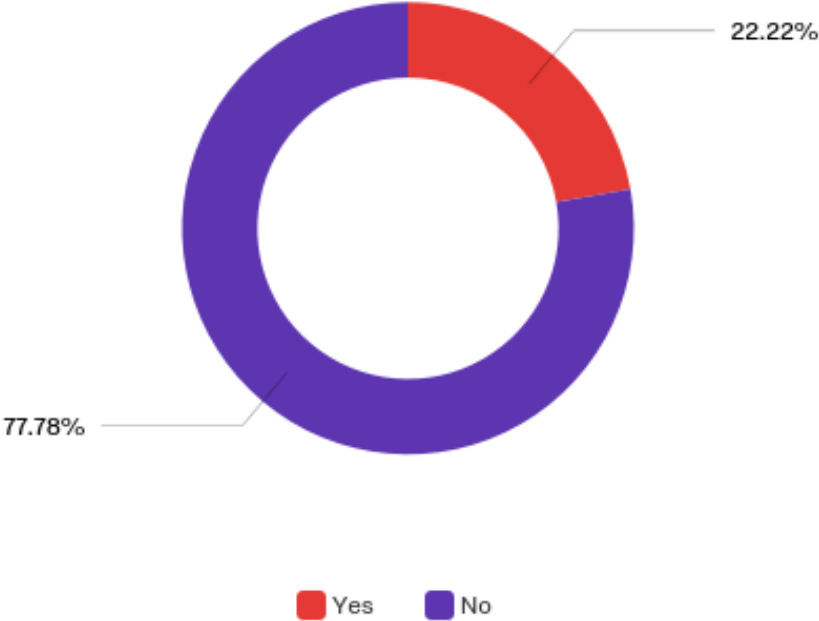
| # | Answer               | %      | Count |
|---|----------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Extremely important  | 26.53% | 13    |
| 2 | Very important       | 30.61% | 15    |
| 3 | Moderately important | 24.49% | 12    |
| 4 | Slightly important   | 12.24% | 6     |
| 5 | Not at all important | 6.12%  | 3     |
|   | Total                | 100%   | 49    |

**Q15 - Does your university offer mental health services or programs on your campus?**



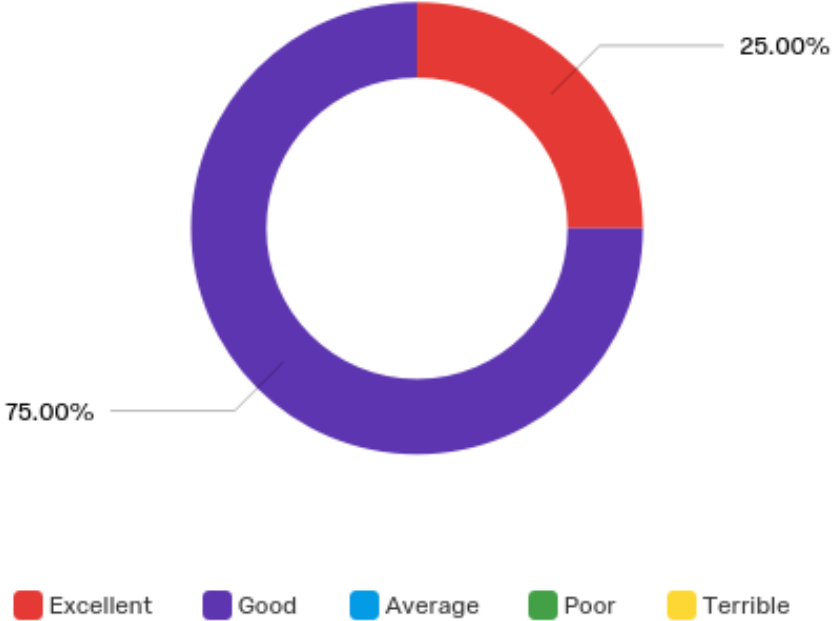
| # | Answer     | %      | Count |
|---|------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes        | 36.73% | 18    |
| 2 | No         | 2.04%  | 1     |
| 3 | Don't Know | 61.22% | 30    |
|   | Total      | 100%   | 49    |

**Q16 - Have you accessed mental health services such as counseling services at your university?**



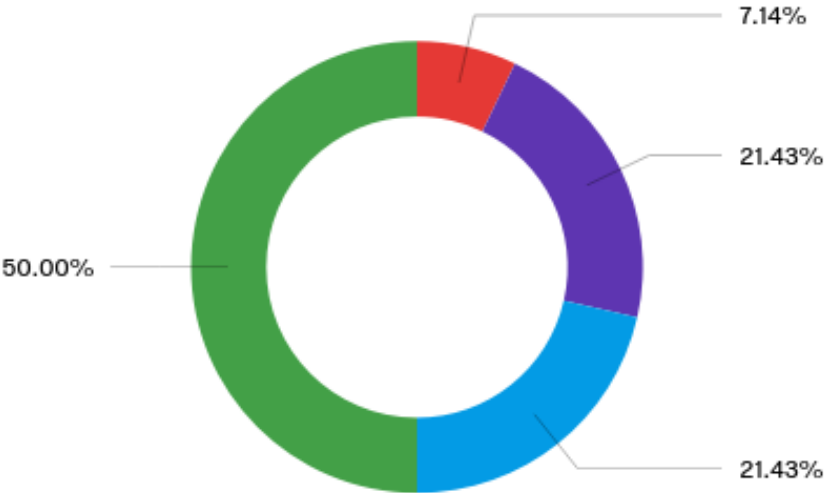
| # | Answer | %      | Count |
|---|--------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes    | 22.22% | 4     |
| 2 | No     | 77.78% | 14    |
|   | Total  | 100%   | 18    |

**Q17 - How would you rate your experience at your university's mental health services?**



| # | Answer    | %      | Count |
|---|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Excellent | 25.00% | 1     |
| 2 | Good      | 75.00% | 3     |
| 3 | Average   | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 4 | Poor      | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 5 | Terrible  | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total     | 100%   | 4     |

**Q18 - How likely are you to seek out mental health care from your university's counseling center if you were going through a period of mental distress?**

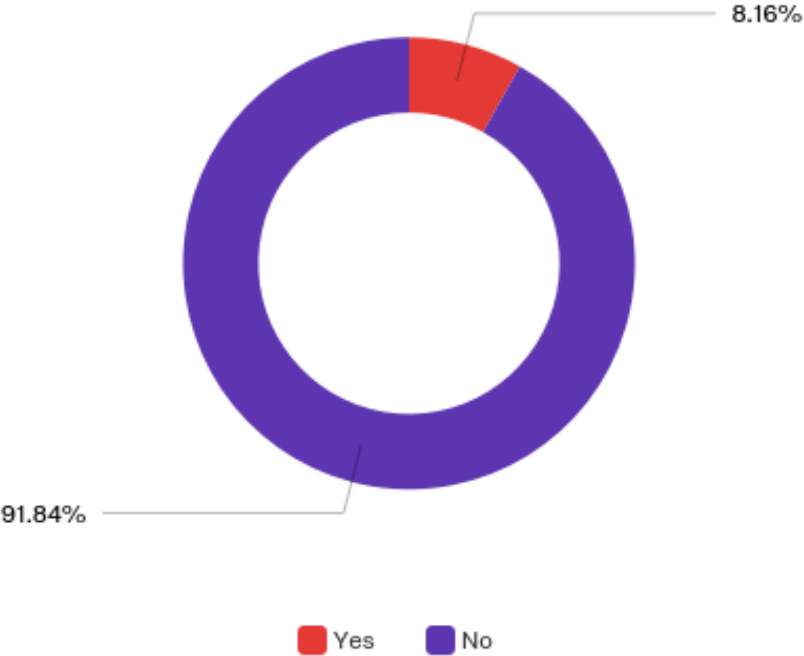


■ Extremely likely   
 ■ Somewhat likely   
 ■ Neither likely nor unlikely   
 ■ Somewhat unlikely  
■ Extremely unlikely

| # | Answer                      | %      | Count |
|---|-----------------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Extremely likely            | 7.14%  | 1     |
| 2 | Somewhat likely             | 21.43% | 3     |
| 3 | Neither likely nor unlikely | 21.43% | 3     |
| 4 | Somewhat unlikely           | 50.00% | 7     |
| 5 | Extremely unlikely          | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total                       | 100%   | 14    |

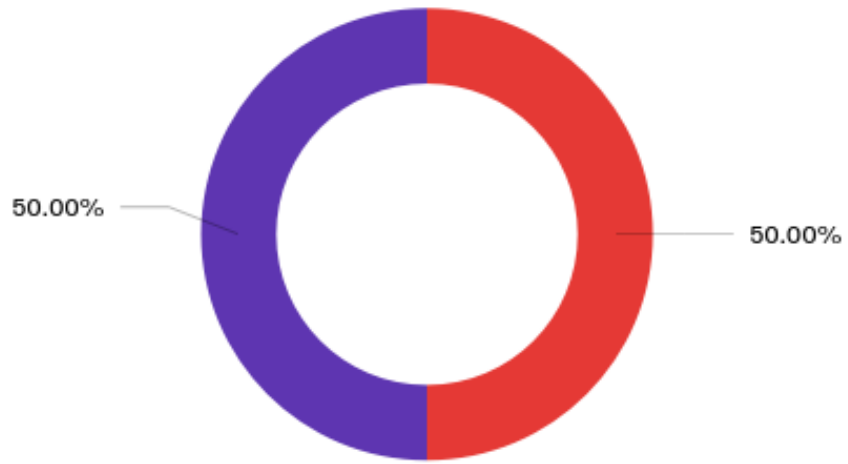


**Q19 - Have you attended a mental health program such as a mental health information session that was held at your university?**



| # | Answer | %      | Count |
|---|--------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes    | 8.16%  | 4     |
| 2 | No     | 91.84% | 45    |
|   | Total  | 100%   | 49    |

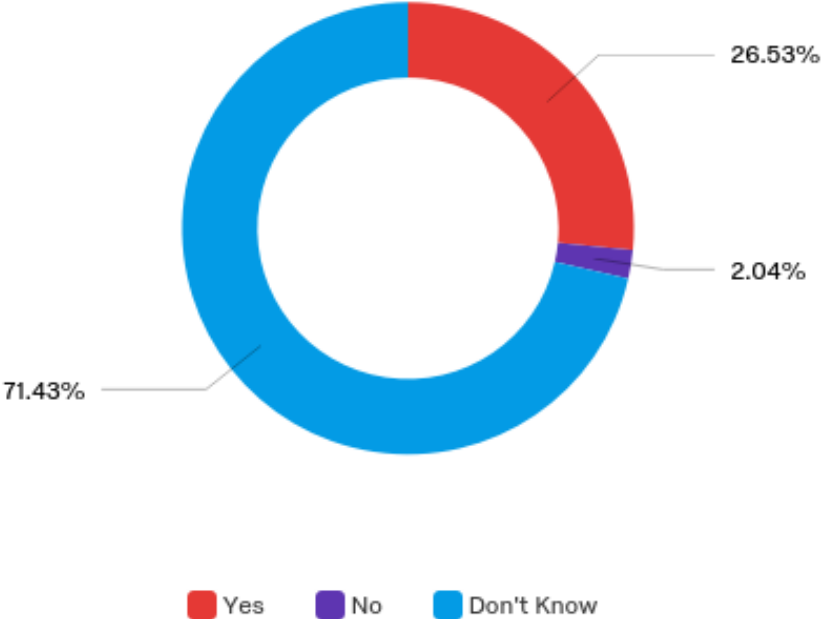
Q20 - How would you rate your experience at the program?



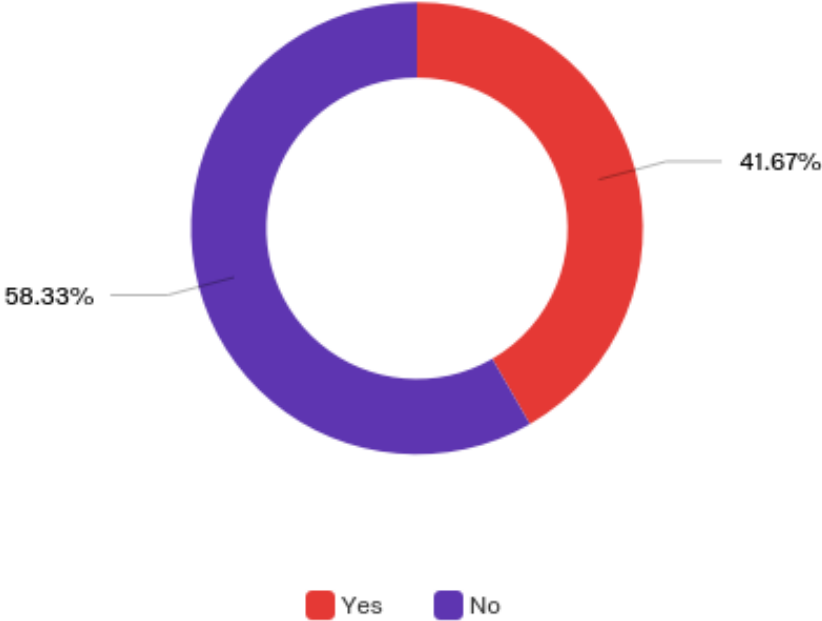
Excellent Good Average Poor Terrible

| # | Answer    | %      | Count |
|---|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Excellent | 50.00% | 2     |
| 2 | Good      | 50.00% | 2     |
| 3 | Average   | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 4 | Poor      | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 5 | Terrible  | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total     | 100%   | 4     |

Q21 - Does your university website include information about mental health or mental health services?

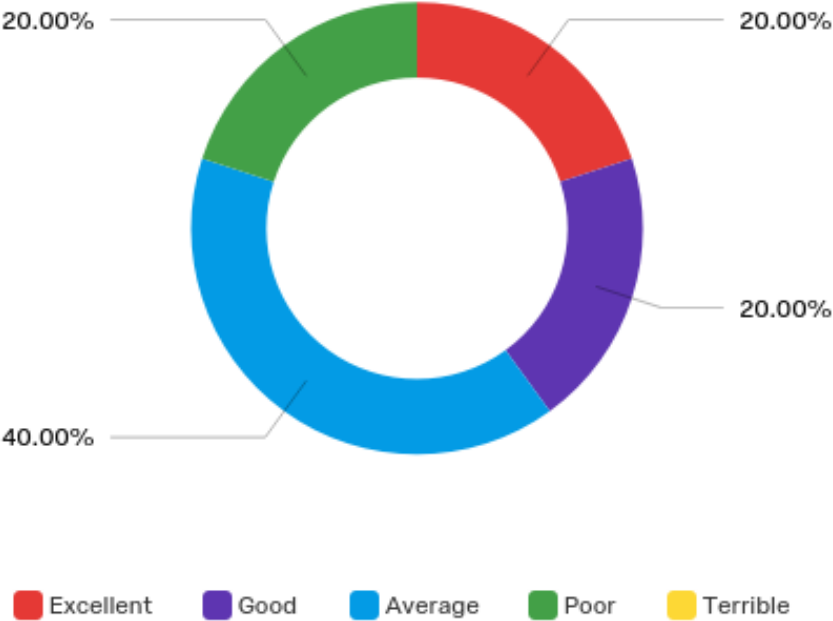


**Q22 - Have you tried to access information about mental health from your university's website?**



| # | Answer | %      | Count |
|---|--------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes    | 41.67% | 5     |
| 2 | No     | 58.33% | 7     |
|   | Total  | 100%   | 12    |

**Q23 - How would rate your experience accessing information from your university's website?**



| # | Answer    | %      | Count |
|---|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Excellent | 20.00% | 1     |
| 2 | Good      | 20.00% | 1     |
| 3 | Average   | 40.00% | 2     |
| 4 | Poor      | 20.00% | 1     |
| 5 | Terrible  | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total     | 100%   | 5     |

## ***Appendix B: University students open-ended responses***

**Q25 - How would your family respond, if they knew you were seeking mental health care?**

---

Definitely supportive but also surprised

---

A little concerned

---

They wouldn't

---

I think they would think I am being dramatic

---

They would be alright

---

My mum already knows and she is supportive

---

They would be dramatic about it and my mum definitely tell everyone

---

Would not tell them

---

Supportive I guess

---

Shocked

---

Worried

---

Not sure

---

They would judge me

---

Good

---

I wouldn't tell them

---

wouldn't care

---

Concerned

---

proud but also worried

---

They would be worried and will probably try to talk the counselors.

---

I think they would be a bit concerned and would probably ask many questions

---

The would understand sometimes I act out and they will recommend I see someone!

---

I don't I would tell them

---

Probably wonder what is going on with me, but in the end would appreciate that I am getting help where needed.

They would be happy for me that I am seeking help

---

I think they would think I am overreacting

---

They would be supportive

---

My family would be a bit concerned.

---

They would be shocked

---

Respectful

---

They would be very supportive

---

Good

---

They would be concerned but very supportive I'm sure

---

Would be concerned but also supportive

---

They would be concerned, but would provide support

---

Not sure

---

They would be worried about me though they may not understand it. However, they would definitely encourage me to seek help.

---

Very supportive

---

They would help

---

Be concerned and ask me what's going on

---

Pretty supportive overall, would be glad if I was getting help when I needed

---

They would support me

---

They'll be surprised.

---

Well.

**Q26 - What barriers, if any, exist in accessing mental health services from your university?**

---

I don't know

---

None

---

Haven't tried accessing them

---

Not a lot of information about it

---

It is so hard to make an appointment

---

It's just the way it is perceived. People would think you are crazy or depressed

---

Friends and family

---

I honestly don't think I have had any issue that require me to go for mental health services

---

More ads

---

No enough information about them

---

No information

---

I always think they are no available

---

None

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None

---

Some counselors are really bad

---

No one knows they exist

---

I haven't tried

---

There are really not any

---

I think you would have to wait for a long time to get to talk to a counselor

---

I feel like most of them are not really engaging on a student level!

---

I don't think I have ever been in a position where I have to acces the services

---

Not too sure.

---

I don't know

---

They do not ad well

---

I wouldn't want my peers to know.



I can't think of any.

---

Many people don't know about them

---

Nothing

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Personal time constraints, lack of advertising

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None

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I feel that the University of Melbourne probably does offer mental health services, but upon trying to call right now I can't be sure. I think that fact that someone like myself cannot immediately be sure that there is dedicated mental health services available on campus presents a barrier.

---

Friends and peers

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Not sure

---

Not sure.

---

Not enough information accessible

---

NA

---

Nothing that I am aware of

---

Just not advertised enough

---

It is not well advertised.

**Q27 - What improvements, if any, should your university make to improve to the mental well-being of students?**

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Better services

---

I don't know

---

More open space on campus

---

Out reach

---

Hire more people and maybe even a school hotline

---

Make people aware of the services they provide

---

I don't know

---

None

---

Same as above

---

More advertisements

---

More ads

---

Publish their office house and also walkins without appointment

---

Don't know

---

Fun programs

---

Hire more counselors

---

Put flyers around campus about there programs

---

None

---

There website should allow you to schedule and appointment.

---

Remove the stigma students have

---

Younger counselors who can related!

---

Engaging programs

---

Offer free meditating classes and try to emphasize how important taking care of your mental health is.

---

I don't know

---

They could make themselves more known

---

N/A

I don't know.

---

Advertisement

---

Nothing

---

Perhaps a compulsory mental health information session - 1 per year

---

None

---

Better information about the services available would be good. So that it is common knowledge among students and staff.

---

Not sure

---

Don't know. There are a lot of corners and spaces to chill out around the campus so I find that extremely helpful already.

---

Regulated emails or social media interaction

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---

Nothing that I could think of at the moment

---

Advertise?

**Q28 - Are there any other suggestions or information you would like to provide in regards to mental well-being among university students?**

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Fun programs like yoga that help with wellbeing

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No

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Not really

---

Bella you just asked this question

---

Same as above

---

None that I can think of

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No

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No

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No

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No

---

Same as above

---

Same as above

---

No

---

Nop

---

Nop

---

I think mental health is important but no one really cares

---

No

---

Not really

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No

---

students need to be more supportive of each other!

---

I can't thing of any

---

I feel as though a student who is able to receive mental health care is a very good thing because it can help them be a better functioning student, and it often leads to better results.

---

No

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No

N/A

---

I think if you have a problem anyone should seek help.

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No

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Nothing

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None

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Not sure

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It would be nice if they had a totally designated quiet rest/chill out space.

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---

The mindset to seek help when one needs it I believe need to be more promoted

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Same as above

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More advertisements and encouragement.