Title

How to foster resilience in higher visual art education: Viewpoints from the students

Authors

Eileen Siddins[i], Professor Ryan Daniel[i], Professor Margaret Anne Carter[ii], Doctor
Beryl Buckby[i]
James Cook University[i], Australian College of Applied Psychology[ii]

Contact

eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au

ryan.daniel@jcu.edu.au

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Abstract

The potential for Australian universities to fortify their students' wellbeing cannot be overlooked. As mental health difficulties increase within the Australian population, now is the time for universities to proactively support and sustain their students' resilience in preparation for study and work challenges. However, in the visual arts, there is still limited consideration of student opinions on this matter. In 2018 and 2019, the Visual Arts Wellbeing (VAW) research project explored the wellbeing needs of visual art students in Australian universities. This research gathered student perspectives on how university life influences their ability to thrive, and how universities can enhance visual art students' resilience and mental health while they are enrolled in their university degree. The recommendations that emerged from these research findings presented clear strategies to improve art students' wellbeing, including ways for art students, educators, and industry members to foster inclusivity and nurture a sense of belonging. This paper provides a general overview of the VAW research findings, with a focus on digital strategies to enhance visual art students' connectedness with their fellow artists.

Biographies

Eileen Siddins

Eileen Siddins is a doctorate candidate who has interest in enhancing art students' wellbeing and resilience within higher education settings. Her research is published by the International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change, Journal of Arts & Humanities and the Australian Council of Arts & Design Schools. You can find more information about her research at www.wellartist.org.

Professor Ryan Daniel

Professor Ryan Daniel is a senior researcher in creative arts and creative industries at James Cook University, Australia. His research is published in Creativity Studies, Creative Industries, International Journal of Cultural Policy, Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, CoDesign, Music Education Research and the British Journal of Music Education.

Professor Margaret Anne Carter

Professor Margaret Anne Carter started her career in education as a teacher and moved from the classroom to work as a Special Education Consultant and Senior Guidance Counsellor, before setting up her private practice as a change specialist. Margaret's career in higher education, both in Singapore and Australia, includes teaching, academic leadership, community service and research. In 2017, Margaret was awarded the National Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning, and she has published in many research areas including teaching and learning in higher education, resilience and mental health and wellbeing, preventing cyberbullying, young childrens' social behaviour and character education in early childhood.

Doctor Beryl Buckby

Doctor Beryl Buckby is a Clinical Psychologist teaching and supervising in the Clinical Psychology Program at James Cook University for the past sixteen years, where she coordinates "Mental Health Disorders across the Lifespan." Over that time, Beryl has supervised multiple Honours, Masters of Clinical Psychology, and been on the supervisory team for two PhD research projects, as well as teaching and supervising students' professional practice skills. Beryl has a specific interest in researching Interprofessional collaboration and practice to enhance outcomes in student learning that informs students' future practice with patients and clients as well as preparing them with knowledge and understanding of other health and social care professions. Beryl has also been an active member of the Australian Mental Health in Higher Education Conference since 2017 which epitomizes Interprofessional collaboration in planning and programming.

Eileen Siddins[i], Professor Ryan Daniel[i], Professor Margaret-Anne Carter[ii], Doctor Beryl Buckby[i]

James Cook University[i], Australian College of Applied Psychology[ii]

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Keywords: Visual Art Undergraduates, Australian Creative Curriculum, Student Connectedness, Wellbeing, Resilience, Mental Health.

The potential for Australian universities to fortify their students' wellbeing cannot be overlooked. As mental health difficulties increase within the Australian population, now is the time for universities to proactively support and sustain their students' resilience in preparation for study and work challenges. However, in the visual arts, there is still limited consideration of student opinions on this matter. In 2018 and 2019, the Visual Arts Wellbeing (VAW) research project explored the wellbeing needs of visual art students in Australian universities. This research gathered student perspectives on how university life influences their ability to thrive, and how universities can enhance visual art students' resilience and mental health while they are enrolled in their university degree. The recommendations that emerged from these research findings presented clear strategies to improve art students' wellbeing, including ways for art students, educators, and industry members to foster inclusivity and nurture a sense of belonging. This paper provides a general overview of the VAW research findings, with a focus on digital strategies to enhance visual art students' connectedness with their fellow artists.

Introduction

There has never been a more critical time to promote and protect art student wellbeing in Australian universities. When considering the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, it is likely that art students will continue to experience disruptions during their education including increased university fees and decreased funding opportunities, social isolation, and limited job opportunities as art graduates (Doidge & Doyle 2020; Fielding & Trembath 2020). Research conducted before the

pandemic (Universities Australia 2018) indicates that financial challenges experienced by university students influences their wellbeing, and it is evident that both economic and social challenges during the pandemic continue to negatively impact the mental health and wellbeing of those in the arts and culture sector (ArtsHub 2020). This necessitates that students are better prepared to mitigate the challenges they experience both during and post-COVID in Australia. Such preparation can include wellbeing-framed learning within university settings, to teach students about self-management.

In 2018, the VAW project was launched to research the mental health, resilience, and wellbeing of visual art students in Australian universities. A review of extant literature revealed that the wellbeing needs of visual art undergraduates—such as those studying design, illustration, and ceramics—had not yet been comprehensively researched (Siddins 2018). Hence, the project contributed an evidence base to bridge a gap in scholarly literature and inform educational reform. This research sought to increase students' awareness of their own agency and refer to their expertise in the university student experience (Baik, Larcombe & Brooker 2019; Busher 2012), by prioritising their perspectives on how to improve and sustain their wellbeing during art education. To understand these students' wellbeing needs within educational contexts, a transformative mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011; Mertens 2009) collected students' opinions through an online survey (n=247) and semi-structured interviews (n=29). These participants studied visual art disciplines including:

1. fine arts (including painting, drawing, print, sculpture, ceramics, and/or textiles),
2. illustration and design (including graphic, interactive, UX, or UI design), and
3. digital media (including digital illustration and animation).

The research participants provided rich and complex insights regarding the visual art student experience at university. A clear need to improve student wellbeing within educational contexts emerged from these mixed findings, and participant recommendations detailed varied ways for transformation to achieve this. These participant recommendations were compared with extant research literature and then categorised, as summarised in Table 1 below.[1] The five recommendation categories in this table are presented in order of most mentioned by participants. However, this order does not negate the importance of each recommendation. Given COVID-19 social distance restrictions can increase student loneliness and online interactions do

not always facilitate informal relationships, an increase in digital interventions that actively improve connectivity is necessary (Fisher et al. 2020; Parks & Boucher 2020). For the purpose of this short paper, the recommendations relevant to digital inclusivity, belonging, and connectedness will be briefly explored. Hence, relevant recommendations drawn from Category 4 (see Table 1) will be discussed by first focussing on educator and peer engagement, then peer and industry engagement.

Table 1: A brief overview of the Five Research Recommendation Categories

	Category 1: Reassess current curricula within the context of current student demographics and feedback, industry standards, and research on wellbeing intervention.
	Category 2: Increase support and training for university staff. Enhance support service accessibility and partnerships with university. Improve care, support, and training for university staff.
	Category 3: Implement wellbeing-enabling intervention into curricula. Weave wellbeing-framed learning—that is relevant to the visual art student experience—into curricula, co-curricular, and other forms of creative learning.

Category 4: Foster creative communities through peer and industry engagement. Provide supportive, accessible, and inclusive opportunities for visual art students to cultivate communities of practice.

Category 5: Clarify student expectations of their degree. Provide clear and open communication about the culture that commencing art students will experience, as well as the teacher's duty of care, student conduct, and other learning responsibilities.

Improving creative communities through educator and peer engagement

The VAW research participants (n=45) made frequent comments relevant to this section by requesting improved support and community-building opportunities. This commentary related to participants' preferences for more connectedness at university, which has previously been discussed in Australian literature (Baik, Larcombe & Brooker 2019; Orygen 2020a). Foundational to any strategies that foster educator and peer relations, the authors acknowledge the need for university stakeholders to shift their priorities to student engagement, by facilitating authentic online networking environments (Dreamson 2020) and mutually respectful and personable interactions between students and staff (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman 2020). Enabling educators' increased social and academic support for students provides varied benefits, including their increased self-advocacy, communication skills, engagement, belonging, and connectedness with their peers (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman 2020; Zumbrunn et al. 2014).

Fostering positive connections between visual art students and their peers at university improves social support, both during their degrees and after graduation. Students can be motivated to invest time in forging new connections if they are made aware of the benefits, including the potential to enhance their university experience, develop communities of practice, and create new job opportunities (Frenette & Dowd 2018; Mavri, Ioannou & Loizides 2020). This is a necessary area of wellbeing

intervention, given many research participants (n=121) sought help from their friends and peers when they experienced university challenges. The findings also suggest the potential for students to be motivated to develop their mental health literacy for the sake of supporting their peers (Thorn et al. 2020). Hence, visual art students could benefit from access to online short courses like the Mental Health First Aid Kit (Kitchener et al. 2010).

To combat student loneliness, the research participants endorsed inclusive and accessible social clubs (n=15) and relaxing and fun activities (n=23) to help build supportive networks. Although many of these student recommendations related to social activities that are held in a physical location, social media platforms are inherently participatory and provide opportunities for members to collaborate, share, and comment on the outcomes of their art practice (Greenhow & Chapman 2020). Current research literature indicates that Australian art educators have already employed, or seek to employ, strategies to increase dynamic student interactions online (Burke, 2020a; 2020b). These strategies include asking students to create artwork or run visual art workshops for their local communities, record the progress, and share the outcomes on their devices (Burke 2020b; Cross 2020). Students have used social media, forums, blogs, websites, wikis, and virtual gallery tools to engage with their teachers and peers, while educators have explored Voice Thread software, augmented and virtual reality, hover cam recordings, and other innovative technologies for students' active learning (Burke 2020a; 2020b; Marshalsey & Sclater 2020).

Australian visual art educators have provided innovative and engaging ways for their students to collaborate and create online (Coleman & MacDonald 2020; Cross 2020). However, despite educator efforts to provide welcoming and less formal online interactions with students, research literature highlights the need for improved digital methods that sustain students' connections with their peers (Marshalsey & Sclater 2020). The VAW research participants also referred to challenges that they experienced when interacting online (n=10) including procrastinating and comparing their work with other artists. To encourage students positive online interactions, educators could provide guidelines to intentionally help students be well-informed, ethically responsible, and safe digital citizens (Carter & Goldie 2017; Greenhow & Chapman 2020). By establishing equitable access to online engagement, social group connections could be more accessible for those who are studying remotely, students with disabilities, or students who have work and family commitments (Briant & Crowther 2020).

Improving creative communities through peer and industry engagement

Among recommendations for further peer connectedness, the participants also referred to a need to connect with art practitioners (n=20) and better understand their industry (n=46). As these participants explained, industry engagement reveals the realities of the creative workforce to students, and increase their sense of belonging with other industry communities. Increasing industry engagement with students impacts their positive wellbeing, education, and employment outcomes (Rashid & Louden 2019). The research literature provides current examples of digital work integrated learning (WIL) and group projects that have involved students' rapid digital innovation, socially mediated learning, and empowering community resilience (Briant & Crowther 2020; Mavri, Ioannou & Loizides 2020; Talmage et al. 2020). One example is a collaboration between final year design students in Australia and staff from Orygen, who worked on the #chatsafe project in 2020.[2] Another example of digital WIL learning will be explored next.

Over a 13-week semester, Mavri and colleagues (2020) conducted a study to investigate social collaboration in the context of university and industry communities of practice. During this study, third-year multimedia and graphic art undergraduates (n=38) completed a group assessment to design and develop a website. These student groups were split into two for comparison: Group 1 interacted with industry members, graduates, alumni mentors, and educators while using online tools to collaborate, whereas the control Group 2 were limited to more traditional university exchanges. As indicated by the findings, Group 1 achieved significantly higher creative outcomes. The feedback Group 1 students received from communities of practice motivated them to enhance their learning by engaging more deeply with their work and improving their collaborative problem-solving. Additionally, the experience helped inform these students of real-world practice while also challenging their meaning of achievement.

As research literature indicates, opportunities to authentically collaborate, exchange ideas, and receive feedback are necessary to meet design students' learning needs (Fleischmann 2018). Findings from the VAW project also indicate that these opportunities help students forge supportive relationships that benefit their wellbeing. Socially mediated learning through industry and student communities of practice achieves this, while also helping students realise the realities of their creative workforce (Mavri, Ioannou & Loizides 2020) to help them navigate their industry (Hennekam et al. 2019). Hence, students can use these types of digital WIL experiences to enhance their social coping strategies and creative resilience. Such

meaningful interactions do not need to involve formal assessment, however. Informal and digital peer feedback sessions, similar to year-on-year crits (Logan 2013) for example, gives students the opportunity to communicate with their peers and industry members. Other digital initiatives might encourage students to share their voice anonymously with creative industry members and healthcare professionals, such as the Asking For A Friend event which is facilitated by Never Not Creative (2020).

Conclusion

This paper provides recommendations that emerged from VAW participant responses and aligned with current research and teaching practices identified in scholarly literature. Although these recommendations are not exhaustive, they provide both insights and potential ways forward for digital strategies to enhance student inclusivity, belonging, and connectedness—with the potential to cultivate student resilience and wellbeing. However, as indicated by presenters in the recent ACUADs conference (Mason 2020), digital platforms still need to be improved for smoother creative collaboration and networking experiences. As many educators have also experienced in 2020, online learning involves the redesign of course content and consequential increase of academic workload (Fleischmann 2018). It is thus vital for university stakeholders to support educators in their efforts to enhance authentic online learning and digital community experiences. Fortunately, visual art educators are well-placed for this transition and have already demonstrated the tenacity, resolve, agility, and practicality needed to navigate transformation in higher education (Coleman & MacDonald 2020). In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, such leadership is heartening and necessary to support and protect visual art students' wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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[1.] Although this paper provides a general overview of the research findings, further publications detailing the participants' voices will be made available in the future via the VAW project website: www.wellartist.org.

[2.] This information was shared during a webinar that was not recorded (Orygen, 2020). For a written reference of the students' design work, see Portable (2020).