WANBEL RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM 2026

Transforming Learning, Leadership and Wellbeing Across the Pacific

Wellbeing, Resilience and Mental Health



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23 to 25 November 2026

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AdvanceHE

Curtin University Dubai

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Tapping the talent: Securing student wellbeing outcomes through understanding global university campuses' student peer mentor wellbeing programs

Establishing a student peer mentoring wellbeing programme toolbox

Presented by: Curtin Academy

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Agenda

- Development of the student peer mentoring wellbeing toolbox:
  - Contextual approaches for student well-being in Australia and challenges for Papua New Guinea
  - Fundamental components
  - Students as partners
  - Neurodiversity and environmental considerations
  - Evidence-based university mentor wellbeing program, i.e., The Comfort Corner
  - Practical considerations
  - University peer mentoring wellbeing programs
  - PNG context and student wellbeing
  - Conclusion and questions for the panel

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Context

- Young adults' wellbeing is one of the important challenges facing society.
- Tertiary students tend to first turn to their peers for support when they experience psychological distress.
- The less formal nature of peer support may remove barriers to help-seeking, encouraging students to ask for help earlier.
- Tertiary institutions are looking at ways to better support student wellbeing to create an equitable and inclusive environment



Ref:https://us.images.westend61.de/0001727755pw/cheerful-young-people-having-in-college-campus-students-having-fun-in-university-campus-JLPSF06368.jpg

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Context

- The transition to university is often a time of significant change and stress for many students.
- Risk factors include:
  - assimilating into adult roles,
  - navigating disability, discrimination and/or inequity of access
  - geographical re-location
  - loneliness and fears of the future,
  - acclimatising to academic expectations and course load,
  - concerning local and world current events.



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Context

- In 2019, in Australia, 65% of students studying reported experiencing mental health issues
- Many students fear seeking support due to perceived negative consequences of formal help seeking e.g., stigma
- Universities have a moral and ethical obligation to recognise and support at-risk students
- Peer-based approaches are proving beneficial in enhancing personal resilience factors and retention rates

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Papua New Guinea Context and Student well-being

- 67% of Papua New Guinea's population is under 35 years, creating significant demand for education and employment opportunities (Zuhukepe & Yembinaro, 2025).
- Only around 10% of young people complete tertiary education and secure employment annually, contributing to uncertainty regarding future career opportunities (Zuhukepe & Yembinaro, 2025).
- Many university students relocate from rural communities and are the first in their family to attend university (Palani & Norman, 2025).

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Papua New Guinea Context and Student well-being

Common challenges for students include:

- Financial hardship
- Accommodation insecurity
- Transport difficulties
- Food insecurity
- Limited digital access (Zvavahera et al., 2026; Palani & Norman, 2025)

These structural factors can impact mental health, academic engagement, and student retention (Palani & Norman, 2025; Zvavahera et al., 2026).

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Papua New Guinea Context and Student well-being

In a recent youth survey in PNG:

- 87% identified stress, anxiety, and depression as major contributors to mental ill-health (Zuhukepe & Yembinaro, 2025).
- Participants reported difficulties accessing counselling and mental health support (Zuhukepe & Yembinaro, 2025).
- Factors associated with poorer student well-being and attrition include: Financial instability, academic transition difficulties, limited institutional support, gender-based violence and safety concerns, alcohol and substance use challenges (Palani & Norman, 2025; Zvavahera et al., 2026; Zuhukepe & Yembinaro, 2025)

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Approaches to developing a toolbox



Community support for adolescents and young adults



Student peer-led learning approach



“Talk-to-Me” Mass Open Online Course

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Community support for adolescents and young adults

- Initial “Talk-to-Me” program was developed by Dr Viktor Kacic and Dr Frank Zimmerman
- “Talk-to-Me” program was developed for high school students experiencing mental health challenges
  - Photo exhibition of celebrities with mental health challenges
  - Rose and fortune cookie positive message distribution
  - Currently development and implementation of The Comfort Corner in high schools

"It’s okay to not be okay."



Wer? Selena Gomez, US-amerikanische Sängerin & Schauspielerin

Wie alt? 32 Jahre alt

Welche psychische Erkrankung hat sie? Bipolare Störung, Depression & Angststörungen

Wie geht sie damit um? Therapie, Medikamente, Aufenthalt in einer psychiatrischen Klinik, offenes Sprechen über ihre Krankheit, Unterstützung durch Familie & Freunde

"It’s very important that people raise their voice and break the stigma of mental illness."



Wer? Demi Lovato, US-amerikanische Sängerin & Schauspielerin

Wie alt? 31 Jahre alt

Welche psychische Erkrankung hat sie? Bipolare Störung, Depression, Essstörungen, Suchtprobleme

Wie geht sie damit um? Therapie, Entzug, Selbsthilfegruppen, Achtsamkeit, offenes Sprechen über ihre Krankheit, Engagement für mentale Gesundheit

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Student-led peer learning approach

- Student-led peer learning is a growing field that enhances academic success, student wellbeing and sense of belonging.
- Mentoring and peer-assisted learning have been implemented across diverse tertiary institutions to:
  - support academic transitions;
  - foster community;
  - address student wellbeing.



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Student-led peer learning approach

- The benefits of the student-led learning approach are threefold:

Student level	Peer mentor level	University level
• Increased sense of belonging and social connections • Increase emotional resilience	• Improved communication and leadership skills • Increased employability • Opportunities for reflexive practice	• Enhanced student engagements • Retention of students through cost-effective support program

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Reflection of peer mentors

"When I started university, I felt like I was drowning and had no idea where to find support. Programs like this (The Comfort Corner) are so crucial for students to have somewhere to go. I think having a lived experience voice is vital."

-Student peer mentor

"I am truly grateful for the opportunity to be part of The Comfort Corner. It is more than just a role, it feels like being part of a big family. A family whereby giving and receiving support seems to happen naturally, where every interaction makes our community stronger and more resilient. I feel incredibly lucky to be part of this journey, where each connection we make brings us closer together to support each other"

-Student peer mentor

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"Talk-to-Me" Mass Open Online Cours

- The "Talk-to-Me" MOOC is a global online mental health intervention:
  - targeting university students, equipping them with the skills to support their fellow peers;
  - combination of psychoeducation and gatekeeper training;
  - strengths-based suicide prevention programs
    - Six modules covering mental fitness and strategies
  - Focuses on increasing personal protective factors through authentic connection
  - Mentors in the Comfort Corner undertake the "Talk-to-Me" MOOC as part of their training



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“Talk-to-Me” MOOC video

- Participants who have accessed the “Talk-to-Me” MOOC share their experiences



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“Talk-to-Me” MOOC publications

- The “Talk-to-Me” MOOC has been evaluated in a randomised controlled trial for its effectiveness, alongside a larger pre-post study.

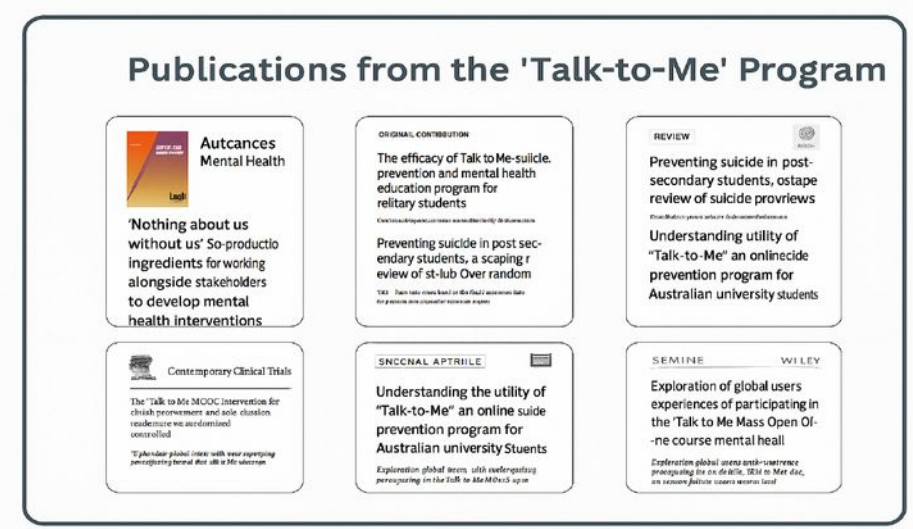


Figure 6. “Talk-to-Me” MOOC publications.

Ref 31

Ref 32

Ref 36

Ref 37

Ref 42

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Fundamental components in a peer mentor wellbeing program

- There are 14 key components to developing a peer mentor wellbeing program



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Peer Support

- Engaging and training students as partners (student peer mentors)
- Using shared experiences of vulnerability and narrative to build connection.

"We step into the unknown and uncomfortable so that those who cannot reach out, can be reached."

- Rachel Oliver, Lived Experience Educator and Researcher, 2024



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Valuing lived experience

- Engaging Lived Experience Educators in the co-design, co-mentoring and co-delivery of the Comfort Corner.

- Curtin University's innovative Valuing Lived Experience Program (VLEP) was created in 2015



Rachel Oliver lived experience educator

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Non-pathologising and non-judgemental

Avoiding labels and assumptions

Employing curiosity

Normalising all challenges as an expression of human experience

Using the language of uncertainty

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Exploration validatio



Ref; https://share.google/CFArtZfdJagaGW1Cy

- Naïve enquirer style questions
- Seeking to understand context e.g.,

  "What does mental health mean to you?"
- Deep listening e.g., voicing back what is heard
- Checking for shared understanding e.g.,

  "Have I understood what you're saying?"
- Acknowledging and validating student's experience and emotions e.g.,

  "I can see how hard this is for you right now."
- Using descriptive language to describe what the listener is hearing e.g.,

  "As I am listening to you, I get this picture in my mind."
- Avoiding platitudes
- Demonstrating trust and belief in the student's ability to problem solve

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Trust and connecti

- Using authenticity, transparency and vulnerability.
- Respecting personal boundaries and the right to privacy.
- Demonstrating respect and consistent kindness.
- Engaging with genuine desire to connect.
- Demonstrating trust and belief in the student's abilities to problem solve and/or self-right.



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"Building trust in and connection with Student Peer Mentors was part of what made The Comfort Corner so successful."

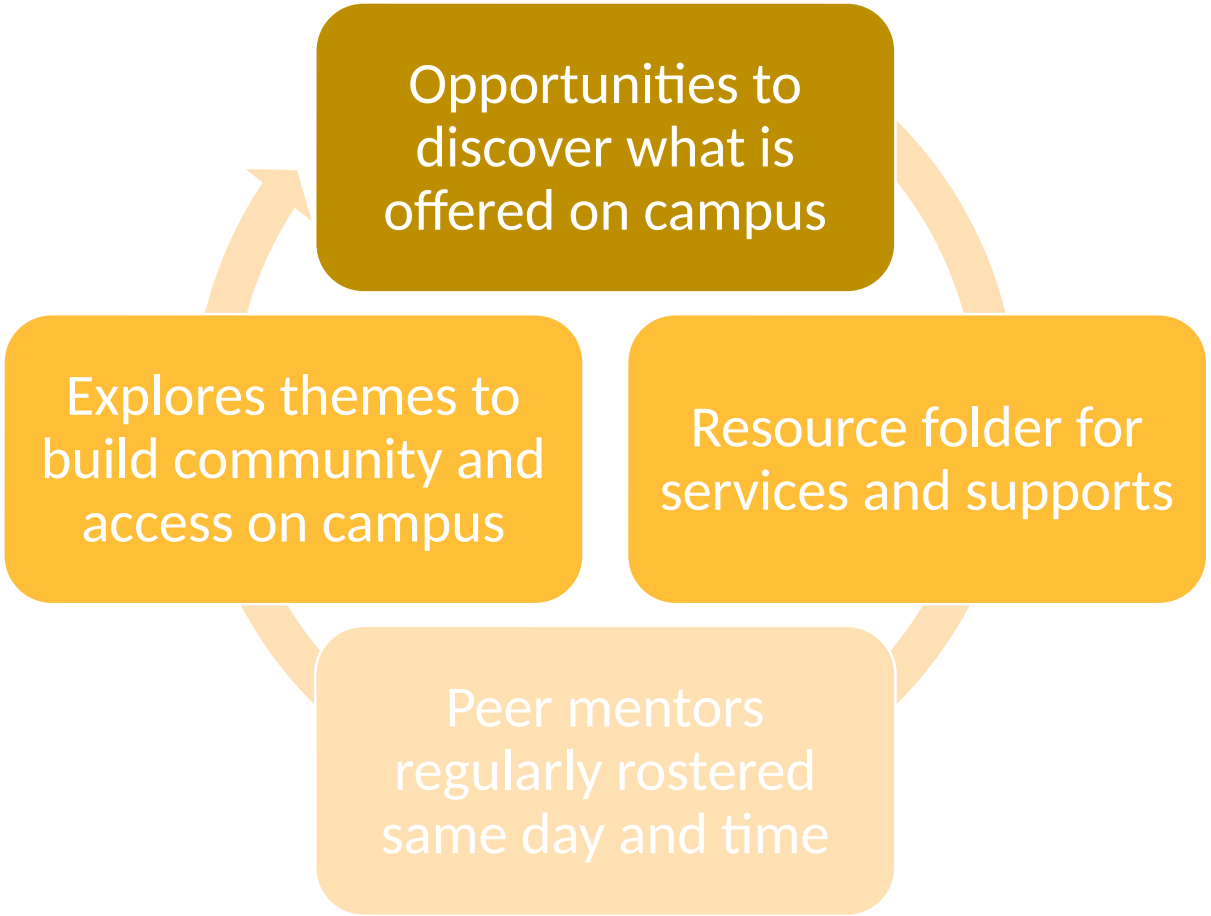
-Associate Professor Ben Milbourn, 2024

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Community and belonging



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Self-esteem and self-worth

- Reflecting observed strengths, including citing examples of when it has been observed.
- Promoting and supporting self-compassion practices.
- Normalising access and participation needs
- Demonstrating deep connection and engagement using body language.



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Self-agency and dignity



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- Avoiding pathologising language and mental models.
- Respecting the right to self-determination.
- Respecting the right to learn through failure.
- Recognising when students have had the opportunity to explore their experiences and be heard, they often find their own solutions and ways forward.
- Pausing before responding to allow the student to add to their narrative, if they choose.
- Waiting for the listener to request support with problem solving rather than initiating it.
- Offering choice without expectations of acceptance of what is being offered.

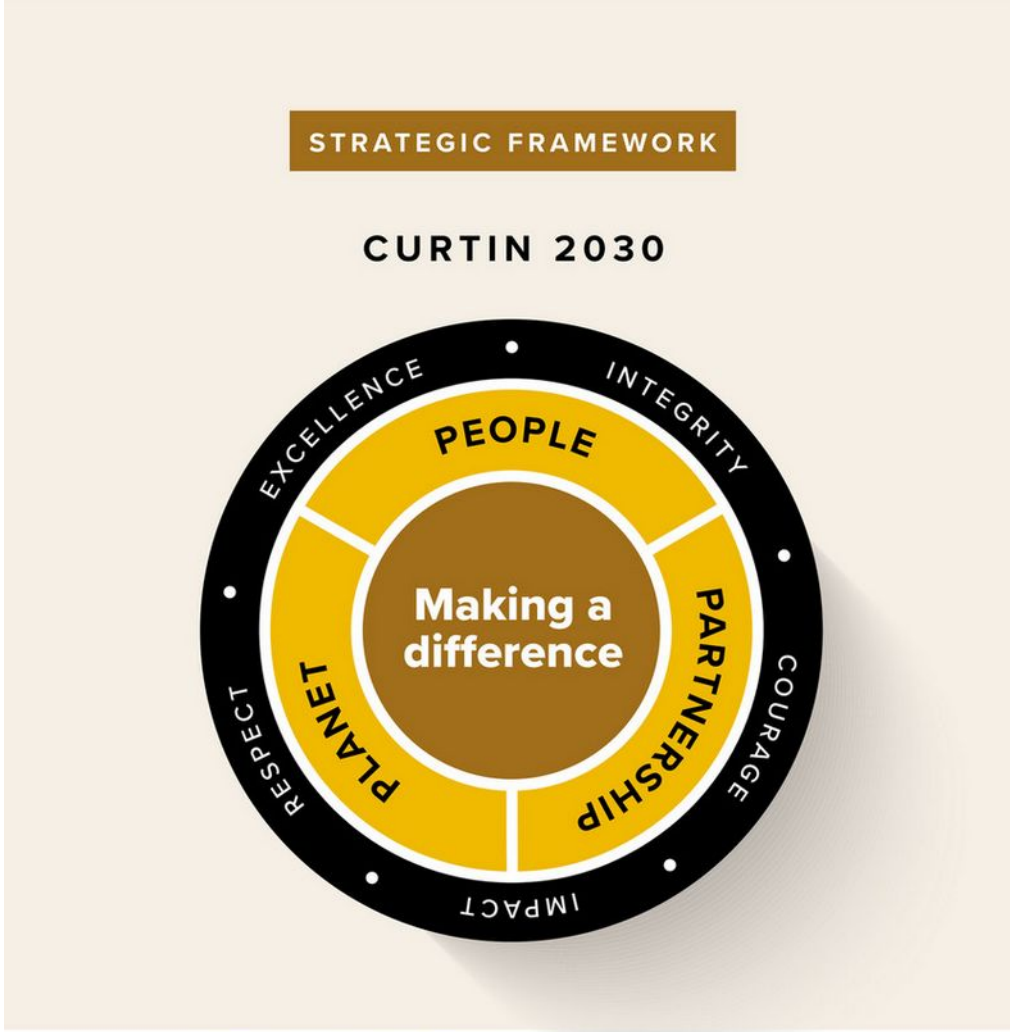
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Curtin 2030 Strategic Plan

- The Comfort Corner aligns with the Curtin 2030 Strategic plan
- Focussing on:
  - Student experience
  - Retention
  - Success
  - Student voice through co-production
  - Social responsibility by promoting equity, access and inclusion





INTEGRITY
To act ethically, honestly and with fairness.

RESPECT
To listen, value and acknowledge.

COURAGE
To lead, take responsibility and question.

EXCELLENCE
To strive for excellence and distinction.

IMPACT
To empower, enable and inspire.

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Marketing and advertising

- Marketing through academic schools, faculty heads, student services (updates at meetings, emailing, flyers, encouraging walk-throughs).
- Visiting classrooms to invite student cohorts to the Comfort Corner.
- Using Blackboard
- Informally through word of mouth



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Risk assessment and risk tolerance

- Peer mentors required to complete “Talk-to-Me” MOOC as part of training
- Further mentoring from academic staff through Curtin Counselling
- Peer mentors could invite academic staff to join conversations with students perceived at an increased risk for mental health needs
- Risk tolerance approach to foster social and personal protective factors

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Data collection and anonymity

- All students who attended the Comfort Corner were asked for their name and student number.
- Students were informed that this information was for statistics and future funding.
- This information was stored in a secure online folder and deleted at the end of the semester
- Students who opted for follow-up wellbeing check-ins had their contact details located through their student number.
- For students who accessed the Comfort Corner, no record of any kind was created or logged against their student record.



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Strengths-based approach

The Comfort Corner uses a trauma informed and a strength-based approach, moving away from traditional deficits-based assumptions towards respecting self-agency and believing in the person's ability to self-right.



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On-campus therapy dog

- The Comfort Corner uses an on-campus therapy dog during sessions.
- The integration of therapy dogs into university settings has been shown to provide:
  - emotional comfort
  - reduce stress
  - foster a sense of community among students.
- These programs offer a complementary approach to traditional mental health services, making support more approachable and engaging for the student population.



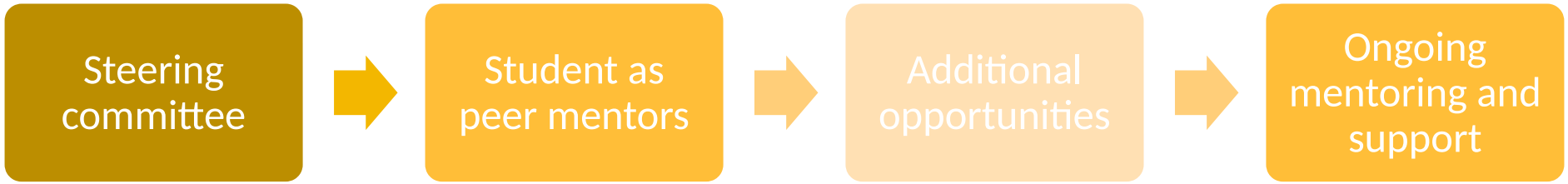
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Students as partners

- Students and the embedding of Lived Experience Expertise was seen as integral to this project and were involved in all aspects of the development and implementation of the Comfort Corner.



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Steering committee

- Designed using the Students as Partners (SaP) framework, empathising collaboration, inclusive and co-design between staff and students
- The Comfort Corner was a student-led, co-design peer mentoring program.
- Steering committee had five students:
  - Varying age and gender
  - Mental health experience
  - Design the structure of the program including time, sessions, roles of mentors, food and activities

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Ongoing mentoring and support

- A minimum of two academic staff members and one lived experience educator were present throughout the sessions to support the students and student peer mentors.
- Staff mentors included members of the Curtin Academy (CA) a dynamic and honorary network of distinguished multi-disciplinary academic leaders dedicated to promoting and sharing teaching excellence at Curtin University.

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Neurodiversity and environmental considerations

- Neurodiversity paradigm uses sociocultural and identity-based approach, alongside Critical Disability Theory
- Critical Disability Theory employs political and intersectional lens
- Advocating for cognitive diversity as a human variation



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Neurodiversity and environmental considerations

- Environmental factors significantly affect neurodivergent students leading to emotional and mental health issues, e.g., increased anxiety
- Traditional assessments and rigid teaching often disadvantage neurodiverse students
- Universities are actively trying to adapt and provide inclusive strategies and accommodations
- One approach is peer mentoring to foster mutual support, building meaningful connection
- Includes a neurodivergent voices in the design and delivery



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Reflections from neurodivergent academics

"I deeply value the Comfort Corner. This initiative offers a much-needed safe space, providing students with the choice to engage in conversations, relax and listen, or participate in activities. A key strength is the presence of peer mentors, specifically trained in communication styles that resonate with neurodivergent individuals."

-Dr Bahareh Afsharnejad

"Having a 'safer space' to go to for recuperation, but also for connection to other likeminded people, is essential for neurodivergent students during time at university. As neurodivergent people we process learning and relating socially very differently to most other people. Being among our community where we are understood and accommodated, means we can 'breathe' more easily and switch off from the typical demands, often placed upon us, is magic."

-Dr Wenn Lawson

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Research into peer mentoring wellbeing program

- This study, conducted at Curtin explored the experiences of student mentors participating in “The Comfort Corner”, a co-designed university student peer-to-peer well-being program.
- Mixed methods study:
  - 13 mentors participated
  - Results found mentors had improved communication skills and knowledge of psychological wellbeing
- The Comfort Corner provided opportunities to foster community support on-campus

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Research into peer mentoring wellbeing program

- Implications for practice:
  - The importance of using the student as partners framework and co-design of the Comfort Corner meant the program was tailored to support student needs.
  - Student mentors received training that was valuable in equipping them with foundational skills needed for supporting student psychological well-being.
  - The importance of weekly sessions including collaboration and embedding of support from university staff.



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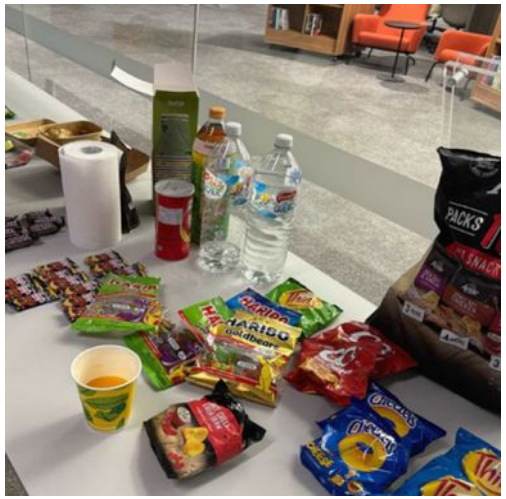
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Practical considerations

- Comfort Corner works best when:
  - Dedicated physical location
  - Set days of operation with routine roster staff and mentors
  - Informal and comfortable setting
  - Free selection of snacks for students
  - Warm welcome greeting at the door
  - Mentees need to understand the use of their personal data
  - Boardgames
  - Therapy dogs
  - Resource folder with academic and social support services
  - Lived experience educators as mentors
  - Advanced rostering of peer mentors and staff
  - Designated staff member to make follow-up calls
  - De-identified data tracking to help secure future funding





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University peer mentoring wellbeing programs

- Four different peer mentoring wellbeing programs are run across different university sites including Curtin Bentley, Curtin Dubai, Murdoch University and Lund University, Sweden.
- This section explores reflections from each site on the following:
  - enablers and barriers to running the Comfort Corner,
  - the unique issues faced by students at each respective university site,
  - the importance of co-production with students in the design, development and shaping of the Comfort Corner,
  - the impact of mental health on staff supporting students,
  - using lived experience in supporting students and the use of compassion.

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Curtin University: The Comfort Corner

- The Comfort Corner is a student-led, co-designed peer mentoring program.
- It is a safe space for students to have conversations about their mental health and well-being with their peers.
- Create an awareness of the support and well-being services currently available.
- Weekly sessions are run in the centrally located library on campus.
- All students are welcome to attend to chat over food, socialise through games and/or activities, meet other students or interact with the therapy dog.



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Curtin University: The Comfort Corner

- Diversity of the peer mentors which reflects the mentees
- Regular debriefing sessions with mentors were essential to protect their own mental health and retain them in the program
- Lived experience educator was an enabler in detecting nuanced signs of distress in students, promoting thoughtful questions and support
- Grounded in contemporary practice
- Barrier was running the program online-low engagement
- Focusing on the unique needs of students, addressed well through co-production



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Curtin University Dubai-The Comfort Corner

- The Comfort Corner is a student wellbeing program focused on mentoring and creating a safe and positive atmosphere
- It provides a space for students to connect, share experiences and receive support from trained student mentors.
- It aims to enhance student's sense of belonging, particularly for those students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, especially given the high percentage of international students at this campus.





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Curtin University Dubai-The Comfort Corner

- Catalyst for positive cultural change
- Mentors trained using the “Talk-to-Me” MOOC are better equipped to listen and respond empathetically to support fellow students
- Peer mentors have helped reduce stigma and normalise conversations about mental health
- Unique international student cohort, peer mentoring is essential-more relatable





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Murdoch University-The Den

- Functions as a non-clinical, peer-led, social connection and wellbeing space targeting preventative and early mental health challenges
- Initially developed to support international students post-Covid in pop-up capacity
- Now welcomes all students seeking to socialise, connect or find help accessing the right supports on campus for their needs.
- Recognised as integral to the university experience
- In process of establishing a permanent, bespoke space to enable longer opening hours and appropriate confidential spaces for more in-depth and personal conversations/ managing more complex mental health needs





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Murdoch University-The Den

- Inclusive of the university ethos of advocacy and social justice, with a highly diverse student body
- Celebrates an array of inclusion activities such as: awareness day events, significant cultural events and sessions around sexual health.
- Co-production has been essential to service design to meet student needs and expectations

"Co-production is everything! You need to look at who your users are and make sure that you are developing something that actually is what they need and what they want."

Sarah Boomer
Student Wellbeing Consultant, Murdoch University





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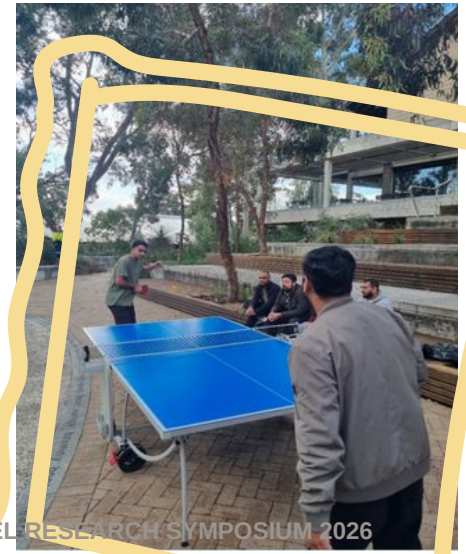
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Lund University, Sweden: The Comfort Corner

- Events were an opportunities for students to anonymously share their mental health concerns and suggestions for campus support
- Data is being used to develop a framework of care recognising the unique challenges faced by students
- Foster an environmental that prioritises mental health for staff and students through co-design of the wellbeing program





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Future Research In Australia

- Student Wellbeing: Pathways to Flourishing in Study and Life



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Conclusion

- Student mental health is of great importance and contributes to securing wellbeing outcomes.
- Peer mentor wellbeing programs are critical in supporting academic success, wellbeing and retention.
- Co-design is key, including students, staff and lived experience educators
- For more information, please see Advance HE website for the manual

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Questions for the Panel

Question 1: Shared Responsibility

- If student mental health is influenced by financial pressures, family obligations, accommodation, safety, and academic demands, what is the single most important change universities in PNG could make in the next 12 months to better support student well-being?

Question 2: Culturally Relevant Support

- Many student support models are based on Western approaches to counselling. What would a student well-being system that reflects Papua New Guinea's cultural values, communities, and ways of seeking support look like?

Question 3: Student Voice and Partnership

- If we asked students themselves what helps them thrive at university, what do you think they would tell us, and how can institutions genuinely partner with students to implement those solutions?

Question 4-the future

- Imagine it is 2030 and PNG universities are recognised as leaders in student well-being. What has changed, and what actions in terms of research and evaluation did we take today to get there?

Your turn: from the world picture to shared questions

1 Talk

In small groups, pick one idea or finding from today. What could we do with it in PNG and the Pacific?

Adopt · Adapt · Contextualise · Leverage · Avoid · Remediate

2 Choose

Agree on the idea that matters most to you, and the response that fits.

3 Shape

Write one research question together, using a question starter.

4 Share

Hand in your question. It will be shared and built on through the rest of the Symposium.

CHOOSE A QUESTION STARTER

Explore How do **[who]** across **[institutions or countries]** experience or use **[the idea]**?

Compare How does **[outcome]** differ for **[who]** across **[institutions or countries]**, and why?

Test To what extent does **[an adapted practice]** change **[a measurable outcome]** for **[who]** across **[institutions or countries]**?

How would we know? What would each site measure or collect?

Who would work on this? Names, institution, country.

A good question is **Focused · Shared · Answerable with evidence · Open**

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