

# Addressing the mental health issues of the ‘Covid Generation’ –Innovative approaches to Performing Arts Studies in Times of Crisis

Bree Hadley, Queensland University of Technology, Australia  
Caroline Heim, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Pre-COVID-19 rates of reported anxiety amongst Australian university students were significantly high. With 79% of Australian university students reporting anxiety as an impediment to their learning (Headspace 2017). With the onset of Covid19, anxiety issues soared. Globally, these impacts were being recorded with a 42.5% horizontal increase in anxiety for some university students (Kaparounaki et al. 2020). As Study Area Coordinators for the Acting & Drama programs at QUT, Heim and Hadley observed this rise in students’ anxiety and its effects on learning. In the scramble to adapt performing arts programs to the online learning environment necessitated by Covid19 shutdowns, colleagues around the globe, fellow lecturers, and learning designers were quick all quick to share resources to help translate performing, rehearsing, and directing activities online. What was missing, amongst this abundance of resources, was tools, techniques, activities, or supports to assist performing arts students – already prone to perfectionism, performance anxiety, and stress (McQuade 2009) – in dealing with the rise in stress they were feeling. In this paper, Heim and Hadley report on initiatives implemented to understand the nature of this rise in stress, through invitations to self-report issues arising via an anonymous Padlet tool during our shutdown Semester – including fear of failure, and judgement, amplified by a sense of ‘missing out’ on key learning that could never be recouped for those who would forever be known as the ‘Covid Generation’. They then report on initial approach to address these concerns, including mental health talks, videos, and adaptations to teaching models to address fear of failure and judgement as students began a staged CovidSafe return to campus in the following Semester.

**KEYWORDS:** University students, Performing arts students, Anxiety, Mental Health, COVID-19

## INTRODUCTION

Pre-Covid19 rates of reported anxiety amongst Australian university students were significantly high. With 79% of Australian university students reporting anxiety as an impediment to their learning (Headspace 2016). With the Covid pandemic, mental health issues escalated amongst students. This paper discusses a response to this significant rise in student mental issues in Acting and Drama students at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2020. In this paper, we analyse the issues and data that motivated us to trial an innovative mental health program to address the needs of students in our Acting and Drama cohort in QUT in 2020. We consider the overarching context of mental health issues amongst University students, and amongst performing arts students, that pre-dated rising stress, anxiety, and concerns during the Covid19 pandemic. We then analyse specific themes and categories of stressor emerging amongst our cohort during the Covid19 pandemic, and what these suggest about students' needs in terms of mental health support initiatives during but also beyond such crisis moments, and share some of our students' reactions to responses we initially trialled during this year. Our results, though preliminary, align with recent findings in the Higher Education literature, arguing for an integrated approach, recognising the connection between students experience of curriculum and student support services, and the lecturers' role in creating the connection between the two, rather than seeing student support as something that sits in isolation separate to yet as remedy for study, career, and future trajectory stress evoked by study programs.

Mental health issues among university students, including performing arts students, have long been a source of concern in the Higher Education studies literature. During 2020, mental health issues in university students escalated worldwide, due to the global Covid19 pandemic. While specific figures for students in our context in Australia are not available, a study of 1000 Greek students during the lockdown period revealed a “‘horizontal’ increase in scores: 42.5% for anxiety, 74.3% for depression, and 63% increase in total suicidal thoughts” (Kaparonaki et al. 2020). A study of 212 Swiss students revealed significantly higher rates of depression than one year ago (Elmer et al. 2020) and 40.7% of 334 Israeli students felt “more depressed” because of Covid (Zolotov et al. 2020). The significant rise in mental health issues in students was attributed to lockdown, isolation, lack of social connection, migration to online learning that does not necessarily suit the preferred pedagogical mode of

all students, generalised uncertainty, and generalised worry for the future, amongst other issues.

As outgoing and incoming Study Area Coordinators for Acting and Drama at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia – a sizeable department offering courses in acting, drama, drama teaching, interdisciplinary studies drama is combined with practice other creative fields – we, along with colleagues in the Study Area, School, and Faculty, of course observed this rise in students’ anxiety with concern. Fortunately, our University, like many Australian Universities, already offers a range of programs, services, and supports to assist students in managing their mental health throughout their studies. This includes mental health first aid training for academic and professional staff, a range of collateral promoting services ready to hand, awareness campaigns, days, and initiatives, counselling, welfare, finance, and other support officers available free of charge through the University, along with referral services to connect students with services outside the University, Disability Services Officers in place to develop plans for students whose mental health needs extend beyond everyday anxiety into clinical mental health issues that need specific accommodations, a medical centre on each campus, and units and services for Indigenous and Queer students. We are also fortunate to have excellent bursary and scholarship programs, which were rapidly upscaled, as soon as we went into what ended up being our main four month lock-down where all engagement was online in Brisbane from 20 March 2020 to 20 July 2020.

Staff within our Study Area, School, and Faculty have historically been committed to engagement with these services and supports for students – in Acting and Drama, a comparatively high proportion of staff have completed Mental Health First Aid Training, sat on and indeed Chaired the Faculty’s Equity Committee, become ‘Allies’ supporting LGBTIQ+ students and staff or trainers for anti- sexual harassment, abuse, and violence programs, and some have also completed external training to become, for example, Mental Health telephone support line counsellors.

What quickly became apparent, with the onset of rising anxiety among our student cohorts as we entered our main four month lock-down in 2020, however, was that additional issues were emerging. Issues that went beyond immediate anxiety about lock-down and ability to cope

with it, and generalised anxiety about the future, and spoke to some really core issues about who our students perceive themselves to be, and, thus, what sorts of supports they need to support their wellness as they negotiate their identity while training for a challenging career path. Clearly, managing mental health issues is not in the job description of a university lecturer per se. The fact that many of our academic staff may have experience working with actors, community performance participants, or even telephone support line help-seekers managing a range of acute and/or long-term personal issues in our professional work outside the University notwithstanding, that is not our role here, and Universities have supports in place to provide that service. However, as Gulliver argues, teaching and pastoral care are interrelated (Gulliver et al. 2018). Certainly, in a recent survey of students in Australia, Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker (2019) found that for students, the assigned tasks, activities, assessments, expectations, and learning environment are linked to external environmental factors and internal emotional factors in influencing stress, and lecturers committed to creating an engaging and supportive curriculum can thus enhance good mental health in Higher Education. In an acute situation, Sheehan et al posits that lecturers need to know how to handle mental health issues, because proper action is potentially life-saving (Sheehan et al. 2019). Recognising the issue, reassuring the student there are resources, systems, and services that can help, and responding without stigmatising mental health or any other aspect of their identity, can already be a critical support invention (Weir 2015). In the context of some of the larger issues and questions Covid19 raised for our cohorts, offering students tools to self-manage can potentially play a role in preventing relatively common anxieties escalating into potentially acute situations – not just in the context of the global Covid19 pandemic experienced this year, or the many smaller scale fire, flood, and other disaster situations unfortunately non-uncommon for our students, but a range of situations that put students into a perceived crisis point in their life.

## ANXIETY ISSUES IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES STUDENTS

Though mental health is an issue of concern throughout the community, studies have repeatedly recognised University students – including Australian university students – as a cohort at extremely high risk for mental health issues (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker 2019). This is, in part, because University students are at a transition point in their lives (Weir 2015)

– between childhood and adulthood, school and employment, and anticipated and actual career. There is, however, also evidence to suggest stress, anxiety, and risk of mental health issues are amplified by the nature of the academic work, and amplified for specific groups of students, such as female students, queer students, or students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker 2019). The fact that Acting and Drama students are particularly prone to perfectionism, performance anxiety, and stress, is also well established in the literature (McQuade 2009). As is the way mental health issues and adverse impact on health and wellbeing continue into theatre professionals' careers, as a result of the complexities of managing a challenging career, where competition for limited project-based theatre and film work is intense, but sense of self often remains strongly attached to capacity to secure this work – established in Australia, for instance, in research Ian Maxwell and colleagues have undertaken for the MEAA (Maxwell, Seton & Szabó 2015). For Acting and Drama students – as, indeed, for theatre professionals in industry – personal, employment, financial, and work-life balance stress can combine with stress about performance in practical versus theoretical tasks, in acting versus writing, directing, devising, producing, arts facilitating or teaching tasks, in simulated or industry-linked tasks, stress about ability to succeed in a desired career path, and a host of cultural discourses about the difficulties they will encounter in attempting to do so, to create risk of mental wellbeing issues. Which, in turn, can lead to failure, leave of absence, withdrawal, and attrition from degree programs. Or, worse, behavioural and substance issues, with direct impact on students health. An Australian survey found that mental health issues contributed significantly to students' lowered achievement and their negative learning experiences (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). This study also noted the influence of mental illness on attrition rates and enrolment cancellations. As noted, for students, their degree program, including the assigned tasks, activities, and assessments, the expectations, and the learning environment, are linked together with the external environmental factors, and their own internal feelings and emotions, as determinants of stress, anxiety, and mental health issues (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker 2019). Addressing the HE sector's awareness of the issue, the HE environment, services, or students' self-management skills in isolation, without attention to the way this intersects with their coursework, is unlikely to meaningfully transform the currently problematic statistics about the problems with student mental health in the sector. Indeed, in Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker's (2019) study, most student suggestions for addressing this

issue (37%), including most arts students suggestions, cohered around improved lecturer communication, approachability, and empathy. In their data, this included setting out clear expectations, communicating clearly, on multiple occasions in multiple modes to suite students' needs, getting to know students and enabling them to get to know each other, and not assuming those who did not always perform well were simply 'lazy' students.

“Our study also suggests that there are discipline-cohort differences in students' needs and preferences so there is a strong case for developing and implementing wellbeing initiatives at the faculty or school level. This is particularly the case for support around career and course advice, an area of concern for many students. As mentioned earlier, the contemporary [*sic*] university experience is extremely challenging for many students, particularly in the context of an increasingly competitive and uncertain employment market (Orygen, 2017; Wierenga et al., 2013)” (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019:683). More availability of services, more individualised services, and more connection with peers were also recommended – but, Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker said, “the importance of teachers cannot be overstated” (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019:683). Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker did, however, stress that “[t]his is not to say that academics need to become mental health experts, either in diagnosing mental health difficulties, or in counselling students experiencing psychological distress. (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019:683).

Clearly, this is not the role of teaching staff, in the performing arts, or any other area. What this study does suggest, however, is that approaches already “consistent with the qualities of ‘good teaching’” (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019:683) – qualities students perceive in terms of setting clear expectations, and in terms of communication, approachability, and empathy, within the meaning of those qualities or principles in the given discipline, were recommended as part of an integrated approach to reducing stressors. “[O]ur analysis reveals that most students' recommendations were appropriately related to fundamental teacher attributes and skill (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019:683), as Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker put it. This said, addressing these issues, individually and/or in an integrated way is not simple, because addressing curriculum stressors necessitates considering some of the core structural bases of how the University has conventionally delivered curriculum (Orme and Dooris 2010) as well addressing the general HE environment, and a range of broader social, culture, and financial stressors that extend beyond the bounds of the campus itself. In the

performing arts, fundamental structures within the industry, translated into the university – from long, intensive, project based work, to competition for roles, to ‘show must go on’ concepts, to pressure to perform and conform to maintain good relations with group work collaborators who will have influence on future career prospects, to hard deadlines, and high performance standards, contribute to expectations that can be communicated clearly. However, as practitioners and educators alike are well aware, not necessarily reconsidered easily, even when studies show impact on wellbeing (Maxwell, Seton & Szabó 2015).

### CREATING A COVID19 COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

The unprecedented and sudden change in circumstances engendered by the Covid19 pandemic sent a wave of anxiety through the QUT Acting and Drama cohort, as it did for university students globally. Although as Study Area Coordinators, we began planning for a range of eventualities from early February of 2020, when the Australian government shut the first of its international borders as late as mid-March 2020, our cohorts could be heard in corridors declaring it ‘impossible’ that performing arts could be transitioned online. In this sense, while rapid transition of teaching, learning, and assessment tasks, and indeed all life activity around them online was no doubt a shock and a stressor to many staff, it was more so for students. This was compounded by personal, social, geographical, and financial circumstances for many students, with limited funding for devices or data to study online, living in restricted space in share accommodation, needing to make decisions about whether lock-down was likely to last long enough to warrant moving from a capital city to a parent’s home in regional or rural location which in our context could be 1000-2000 kilometres away when in reality of course no one could answer this question.

In the scramble to adapt performing arts programs to the online learning environment necessitated by Covid19 shutdowns, colleagues around the globe, fellow lecturers, and learning designers rapidly created a ‘community of practice’ online, in email chains, Facebook groups, and other fora. Many were quick to share resources to help translate training, rehearsing, devising, directing, and performing skills activities and classes online. Indeed, we were so bombarded with suggestions on how to translate theatre techniques/classes online, it became almost overwhelming. One of our more organised

colleagues creating a spreadsheet, to track everything being shared through this global, dispersed, community of practice, and filter what was useful. A quick content analysis mapping out what might be most useful to us in this rapidly rendered spreadsheet, and in the conversations within the global ‘Community of Practice’ that had generated it, showed there was a lot of discussion about classroom work, and also about the politics of showing this work could go online, given this would give institutional leaders the option to retain online post-Covid19, as well as the prospects of departments surviving. The content and conversations within this ‘Community of Practice’ was undoubtedly useful, in itself, and in creating *communitas* with a whole world of colleagues undergoing similar processes of curriculum and pedagogical translation at the same time.

Within our staff group, however, we had questions from the outset about how much of the conversation was actually addressing the underlying anxiety students were experiencing about the transition. How much of the conversation was addressing the questions students were asking not just about what would happen, but what it would mean for them, whether day-to-day, or in terms of the short, medium, and long term impact on their future career. Clearly, some of this could have been related to context – in Australia, and in particular in our context in Brisbane, Covid19 came in the fourth week of our new teaching year, and lasted four months – though in other parts of Australia it lasted as little as four weeks or as long as the whole year. As a result, we were working with a cohort who had little opportunity to begin work, and begin forming relations with each other, before they were stalled and shifted to alternative online modes, particularly amongst our incoming first year cohorts. Clearly, in the Northern Hemisphere, where Covid19 would have come at the very end of a teaching year, and where countries were not managing it in the context of island nations where all borders were shut and all populations put into complete lockdown straight away, and cases rapidly escalated to numbers never seen in Australasia, the situation was very different.

Whatever the reason, discussion of how to deal with students’ stress, anxiety, and questions about Covid19’s impact on career readiness did not feature prominently in the abundance of resources disseminated in the global ‘Community of Practice.’ It rapidly became clear that tools, techniques, activities, or supports to assist our students with this aspect – already prone to perfectionism, performance anxiety, and stress (McQuade 2009) – would be equally essential.

For us then, content analysis, mapping out what might be most useful in the conversations within the global ‘Community of Practice’ had to go beyond theatre curriculum, pedagogy, and techniques. It had to map out categories of anxiety coming up in our cohort, to start identifying what categories of anxiety were emerging, if these categories were shared across our acting, drama, drama teaching, and interdisciplinary cohorts, which of our extant of ‘dealing with anxiety’ resources, systems, and services were more or less useful to the changed situation, and where new approaches and adaptations may be required. This included where new approaches might be required for anxieties about the day-to-day stressors the Covid19 situation was creating for students who very quickly started developing a discourse about ‘having a Covid19 day’ when they could not bear to be engaging via Zoom anymore, as well as new approaches for the short, medium, and long term stressors the Covid19 situation seemed to be creating for students, who almost immediately started to express anxieties about ‘graduating as the Covid19 generation’.

Our mapping and categorising of anxiety was not based on formal surveys or interviews seeking direct responses from students about their experiences, or any direct data-gathering with students, but on our own teacher reflections, following the sum total of our day-to-day interactions i consultations, regular classes which we ran main via Zoom (Pike, Niedeck & Kelly 2020), and one-off ‘value add’ engagement activities with our student cohorts such as some directing masterclasses we offered ‘just for fun’ and a chance to reconnect without the stakes of a class during lockdown. In this sense, it was informal – and what we report here is our reflections, and analysis, with some entirely fictional examples of the style of student comments we were receiving, but no actual student comments or data. This approach was, of course, decided partly by the evolving situation, and the observation of the absence of attention to the mental health issue in the global community of practice, and the almost automatic move to attending to it amongst our staff group. It is potentially disadvantageous, precisely because this approach does not involve top-down, directed, data gathering seeking out categories of anxiety based on review of the literature, or analysis of direct participant data against them. However, it is also potentially advantageous, in that this undirected, bottom-up, emergent mapping has revealed students anxiety going beyond the Covid19 crisis’s immediate impact into longer term career issues in ways we likely would not have

expected, which has become key to our reflections. We also, when entering the lockdown period, converted a traditionally post-it based orientation engagement with students to track how they are travelling into the University, and into the course, online Padlets in two first year performing skills units – entitled “Your Mental Health Questions during Covid-19.” This latter activity allowed students to anonymously self-report their mental health concerns and to ask questions over the four-month period of lockdown.

The online Padlet, the most specific mental health self-reporting and self-expression tool we had in place for this period, drew a total of 106 questions. In our teacher reflections, we felt there were three clearly discernible phases of mental health issues experienced by the students. Each phase was clearly characterized by a predominant mental health issue

PHASE ONE, March 2020, revealed questions and Padlet posts concerned primarily with anxiety and uncertainty.

PHASE TWO, April 2020, was characterized by questions revealing students’ sense of hopelessness, depressed mood and apathy.

PHASE THREE, May and June 2020, was a time that many students voiced their concerns about emergent or re-emergent addictions.

In our teacher reflections, mapping day-to-day interaction for patterns identified the following common thematic categories, with the following – fictionalised and thus not referencing any specific student samples of – types of commentary attached to them:

- I’M HAVING A COVID DAY

So I am going to give up for a shorter or longer period of time while it all gets to me, etc.

- From students feeling overwhelmed, and feeling the need to prioritise ‘self care’ – though this in many cases took the form of ‘self-soothing’ activities rather than true long term ‘self caring’ activities – in the moment

- I DON'T HAVE THE RESOURCES TO DO THIS

So I will travel up and down the coast trying to steal wifi from fast food restaurants, or trying to connect devices to construct an ad hoc technological solution to do this task, etc.

- From students seeking to fix problems, by themselves, but in a way that does not utilise the human, technological, or financial resources available through the University, whether because the student is not aware of them, or does not wish to disclose need for help

- I WON'T BE ABLE TO DO THIS

So I will send a sudden midnight email requesting extension for work that is not actually due for several weeks, or submit a form withdrawing from my degree then minutes later an email asking to undo this mistake, etc.

- From students seeking starting to worry they will not be able to find practical solutions to problems arising in the work, and jumping to 'one large solution,' of delaying, deferring, or withdrawing from the work – then, in some cases, regretting swift leap to this choice, when recalling or realising other solutions available

- I WOULD BE BETTER DOING COMMUNITY SERVICE

So I will request extension or leave of absence to do my nursing/teaching/service work, or run a wellness program for frontline workers, as a more critical activity at this time, etc.

- From students starting to think more deeply about their career choices, and the value of a career in the creative industries, entertaining, inspiring, educating, and promoting thought, in the current global cultural environment

- WE WILL BE THE 'COVID YEAR' / 'COVID GENERATION' THAT DID NOT GET THE SAME SKILLS

So we should all defer this year altogether, rather than try to learn in this unsatisfactory way, in a style that does not suit so many learners in a performing arts cohort, etc.

From students starting to think more deeply about their career choices, and their capacity to succeed in securing work in what Dawn Bennett (2009) describes as boundaryless portfolio careers, typically characterised by constant pursuit of acting, writing, or directing project work across a range of organisations, often in parallel with producing or teaching work, and many arts graduates find it difficult to maintain financial security on creative industries employment alone

Throughout this lockdown period, we of course reminded students constantly about old and newly available supports at the University level, created new consultation sessions, asked students for strategies they thought would work best in the changed circumstances, and framed change teaching and assessment tasks in terms of innovations. This worked, after the initial shock of the change had set in. Indeed, attrition during the lockdown period was not higher than typical, and the quality of the work the students created was excellent, and some of the digital documentation will constitute an excellent calling card for them in the future. However, the anxiety continued, and continued across each of these categories – including the final category, where students expressed stress, anxiety, and a rise in mental health issues based not just on the immediate situation, but on its impact on their long term career prospects, their long term prospects of developing their desired identity as a theatre professional. This continued after a CovidSafe return of practical classes in semester two to campus, in the relatively stable working environment in our location, where, while theatres remained dark for the majority of the year, return to limited socially distanced face-to-face work was possible again after just four months in lockdown. For students, however, the day-to-day social disconnection and other difficulties of the four-month lockdown were in many cases very impactful. For many, this created a swift leap to larger existential questions about choosing a career as an artist, capacity to succeed, practical skills, performance, and what it would mean for them if their desires went unfulfilled. A very realistic intellectual understanding of what it takes to succeed in what Bennett (2009) and others have described as portfolio careers in the arts – and, indeed, in many cases, likely also some understanding that the majority of the performing arts staff teaching them have all taken at least a few out of their career a result of travel, subsequent degree study, maternity, disability, other factors, including at key ‘transitional’ moments in late teens and early twenties – did not dull the felt

emotional intensity of what key life moments missed during Covid19 might mean for prospects in a precarious industry sector. Fear of ‘missing out’ (FOMO) as the Covid19 generation, and thus fear of failure, resulting in adverse wellbeing, and increased risk for mental health issues, and in the worst case scenario self-harm or substance abuse, became the major concerns. The crisis, in this sense, was tapping into risk factors, based on relationship to identity and sense of self, known in our sector (Maxwell, Seton & Szabó 2015).

What the Covid19 crisis highlighted, clearly, was the discipline-cohort specific need for school or faculty level wellbeing initiatives, aligned with curriculum activities, assessments, learning environments, and expectations, in parallel with enhanced awareness, services, and student self-management, that Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker’s (2019) student participants advocated. For performing arts students, self-reported stress is tied to fear about future career prospects in a precarious industry, which was becoming more precarious during Covid19. It is tied to perceptions about value of what one is doing, value of what one will be doing, and prospects of success – in career, competitive, aesthetic, and social value terms – in the short, medium and long term. The distinctive features of this career context amplifies the need to create this connection, between the non-specialist support for wellbeing in a career self-management sense the way the curriculum is delivered, and the specialised support for wellbeing in a more clinical stress, anxiety, and mental health sense that University student services such as counselling are clearly more appropriate to provide. For performing arts students, they are well aware of the project-based portfolio career they will be entering, what they will need to do to succeed in it, and the Covid19 crisis reminded them of it, so response to mental health and wellbeing stressors – even if the direct stressors might not be career based – needed to be placed in the frame of that life and career trajectory context. In this sense, trialling initiatives during the Covid19 period, to address students concerns about ‘graduating as the Covid19 generation’ perceived not to have the same skill set as those before or after them, and thus be disadvantaged long term in a challenging career by that, in an industry now made even more precarious by the global pandemic, has taught us something useful about supporting discipline-cohort-specific wellbeing into the future in other times of crisis – floods, fires, or individual personal crises. It has highlighted, quite clearly, why the connection between the support, and the career context and pathway the student seeking the support is imagining themselves on, can be so very important.

## IDENTIFYING NEW APPROACHES

Our immediate response to the issues in our Acting and Drama cohort was multi-pronged, including the engagement with a psychiatrist to assist in creating resources to offer the students general advice on strategies for enhancing their wellbeing, in an overarching sense, and in relation to the specific anxiety, depression, and addictive behaviour issues they were raising as the phases of lockdown were unfolding. The mental health strategies we employed included mental health talks by the psychiatrist, Mental Health Padlets in two first year units, Questions and Answer weekly videos and a podcast. Drama hosted one “Moving Forward into an Uncertain Future” talk with the psychiatrist, addressing overarching approaches to wellbeing students could deploy, before heading into full lockdown. The talk was delivered twice, was voluntary and students were required to socially distance; half of the entire Drama student cohort attended the first session, and half of the Acting cohort the second. The week before the talk, students were given the opportunity to write questions about their mental health on post-it notes, some of which were addressed in the talk. It was then provided online as a resource for students so that the entire Acting and Drama cohort could return to it as required. Then, as issues were being mapped and addressed through the phases of the lockdown, we were able to create 18 shorter videos trialled with students in two first year performing skills units running across the year. These were predominantly in a shorter, more Q&A format, in which the lecturer and psychiatrist jointly addressed concerns online, specifically for the students. It was vital that the videos were facilitated by the lecturer as the pre-determined student-lecturer relationship not only built trust in the viewers, but the lecturer was able to give specific examples of mental health issues related to aspects of learning such as online learning problems that surfaced in a Drama subject normally reliant on in-person interactions. Questions from either the Padlets or the unanswered post-it notes from the talks were addressed in the videos.

In PHASE ONE, March 2020, where Padlet posts focused on anxiety and uncertainty - issues that exist for performing arts students at all times that became more acute during this period – and videos included: “Rhythm and routine to keep yourself together,” “Using mindfulness to overcome anxiety,” and “How to get over your anxiety to ask for help.”

In PHASE TWO, April 2020, where Padlet posts focused on hopelessness, depressed mood and apathy - again, issues that exist at all times that became more acute during this period - and videos included “Online learning, work and the lazy brain,” “How can I prevent depression during isolation?” and “Why are male suicide rates higher?”

In PHASE THREE, May and June 2020, where Padlet posted focused on emergent or re-emergent addictions. Though it is clear not all performing arts students will encounter issues with inappropriate substance use, still potentially useful to all students, considering broader concepts of addictive behaviour, and broader concepts of self-soothing, self-care, or self-harm behaviours, and how to identify and seek help if required - and videos included Self-isolation: how can I be sure I’m being my true self?,” “Online learning and addictions,” and a podcast entitled “Addictions, relationships and motivation.”

In continuing to respond to mental health needs during isolation, we also trialled extending regular ‘check in’ practices by commencing each lecture – even larger lectures, with >100 students, not just the small voice, movement, and acting classes with <20 students that might regularly include these types of activities – with a short mindfulness exercise drawn from one of the videos. We had Zoom sessions with the sessionals that were taking the other workshops to ensure consistency in approach across classes in the two performing skills units trialling these approaches. It was essential that a health professional, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist was there to provide the needed initial clinical information, but the dissemination of the knowledge and the sharing of the proffered skills was undertaken by the lecturers.

### Integrating Teaching and Support Services as a Strategy to Address ‘fear of reaching out’

In terms of response to these initial strategies, an anonymous questionnaire revealed that 90% of the 60 students found the talk useful or extremely useful, with 88% saying they were likely or very likely to implement take-home recommendations. The subsequent videos received much regular traffic and many students expressed their gratitude and commented on the

usefulness of the resources in emails. What is very interesting about the amount of traffic generated is that recent studies show that although there is an abundance of resources out there for students, they are not using them. Indeed, the recent Australian national mental health report revealed the same thing: people not accessing the services, and therefore a new focus is needed on prevention rather than more resources (Australian Government Mental Health Productivity Commission Report 2020). Several of the student questions in the Padlets and the post-it notes expressed fear of reaching out for help because of stigma and/or inhibitions. The inclusion of the video “How to get over your anxiety to ask for help” listed above, addressed this and again the lecturer provided avenues to QUT mental health student services as possible avenues of help.

Our supposition, based on our analysis at this stage, is that part of the reason for increased engagement is that we are beginning to work on alignment between curriculum activities, assessments, learning environments, and expectations and enhanced awareness, services, and student self-management at a University-wide level as the Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker’s (2019) study advocated. Veness argues, “Few Australian universities have made a significant commitment to improving their students’ mental health, failing to acknowledge its innate connection with their teaching and research objectives” (cited in Usher 2019). Most Universities would likely take exception with the idea that they have yet to commit to improving students – and, indeed, staff’s – mental health. Most offer a reasonably large range of resources, services, and referrals, both mental health specific, and under the broader banner of wellness. The point, here, seems to be about integration, and connection between teaching and support services, and how this can start to address ‘fear of reaching out’(FORO). The nexus between teaching and wellbeing is challenging to address, particularly in performing arts courses, where intensive programs that value dedication, commitment, and competition for prized places in a precarious industry can be difficult for students in complex personal and financial circumstances, and struggles can be dismissed as lack of desire or laziness, and teachers can find departures from long-held disciplinary norms discomfoting. Finding ways to adapt these courses to support the wellbeing of contemporary students with complicated lives in current performing arts courses, in the current HE environment was already an issue needing more attention globally. The Covid19 pandemic amplified the issue – at least for many of our Acting and Drama students. In so doing, it

highlighted that, although the sorts of support for wellbeing a lecturer can offer in the curriculum context should not seek to supplant those more appropriately offered by those offered by counselling in a student services context, there is a role for lecturers, curriculum, and learning activities to play in making the connections and referrals. Specifically, there is a role to play in allowing students to face and feel comfortable with articulating their stressors – from just feeling overwhelmed for a moment, to worrying they will not be able to deal with it all, to feeling like they will not be able to compete in such a challenging career, or should be doing something else – and reactions – from uncertainty, to despair, to unwanted behaviours – if only to themselves, as something that is not unusual, and certainly not unusual amongst performing artists in Australia (Maxwell, Seton & Szabó 2015). A role to play in authoritatively counteracting ‘FORO’ based on suspicion that other performing artists in training may not feel this. As university lecturers, we are often the first responders, and sometimes *only* responders for students not aware of counselling and other student support services, especially in undiagnosed acute mental episodes. Students have a pre-determined relationship with their lecturers as those viewed to have real authority in the specific field they are training for. As above, it is not the place of lecturers to counsel students – even in a crisis – but acknowledging stressors specific to the industry, and implementing anonymous vehicles for self-reporting student mental health and wellbeing issues and encouraging help-seeking such as those recorded above, can be a starting place for connection, understanding and bridging the gap between teaching, learning and wellbeing. For bridging the gap between teaching, support services, and reaching out to the support services. Even in cases where students are simply experiencing more generalised stressors, lecturers are sometimes the necessary connection, to assist students to understand the normalcy of what they are experiencing, as anxiety about career prospects starts to emerge – perhaps unexpectedly – from what might seem unrelated crises large or small. It has taken, perhaps, a worldwide pandemic in the form of Covid-19 to expose how interrelated learning and well-being can be, and how vital it is to create healthy learning environments for university students through addressing their belonging needs and inviting them to share their mental health issues. Mental health programs, such as that undertaken in Acting and Drama at QUT, may go some way to assisting students to cope during crises large, small, and everyday, and perhaps even flourish in a post-Covid world.

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