Paving the way for unique wellbeing intervention in visual art curricula

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In Australian research, curricula have been intentionally redesigned to address the mental health needs of students from different disciplines. Evidence-based curriculum reformation has been advanced for a range of specific disciplines including law, medicine and performing arts. However, there is room for further advancement of intervention within other disciplines. In Australian contexts, there is limited research that provides an evidence-base for art curriculum reformation—to address the mental health and wellbeing needs of visual art students. This paper will discuss the author's current research, framed by the transformative paradigm, that seeks to represent the voices of visual art students by providing a needs assessment and recommendations for future curriculum reformation. By involving the students in decision-making processes of future intervention, sustainable, uniquely tailored techniques can be designed to enhance their wellbeing. In doing so, visual art students' academic achievements, including successful completion of their degree and transition into the workforce, may also be increased.

Key Terms: visual arts, higher education, wellbeing, resilience, mental health.

Definitions

Visual art disciplines: for this paper, visual art disciplines are defined as creative art forms that are "primarily visual in nature" (UNESCO, 2009). These disciplines can include painting, textiles, sculpture and digital art (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Mental health and wellbeing: Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing (WHO, 2014). Wellbeing is described as a positive state that is "not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2014), but rather the thriving or flourishing of an individual (Seligman, 2011).

Resilience: This paper applies a definiton by Ungar and Liebenberg (2011) that describes resilience as a process of negotiating for and navigating through resources to bounce back from and potentially thrive through adversity.

Introduction

Australian research literature continues to highlight ways to address university students' mental health and wellbeing needs. Recommendations in research literature include future directions in policy change, furthered rigorous research, university staff training and reform of course curriculum to develop effective and sustainable intervention for students (Orygen Foundation, 2017; Veness, 2016). Resources such as the *Enhancing Student Wellbeing* handbook for Australian higher educators (Baik et al., 2017) provide strategies in which curriculum can be redesigned to promote and improve mental health literacy and prevent or respond to students' mental health problems. Although some of this research literature takes a university-wide approach to identifying the mental health needs of students, other research literature focuses on university students from specific disciplines (Field, 2014; Hassed, de Lisle, Sullivan, & Pier, 2009).

This paper will discuss the mental health and wellbeing needs of visual art students in higher education. Part One examines the literature discussing factors that influence visual art students' mental health and wellbeing. Expanding on the exploration of literature regarding wellbeing intervention for specific disciplines; Part Two will identify gaps in knowledge regarding the redesign of curricula to enhance visual art students' wellbeing. Finally, Part Three will describe the author's current research, *Visual Arts Wellbeing*, a project that will provide a needs assessment of Australian visual art students to guide future reconceptualisation of art curriculum that will enhance their wellbeing.

Part One: factors influencing The wellbeing of art students

Like other university students, art students can experience a range of factors that influence their mental health and wellbeing. University students can experience many challenges including financial pressures and performance expectations (Carter, Pagliano, Francis, & Thorne, 2017; Evelina, Julia, Johanna, Hernán, & Dan, 2016). Art students completing university degrees can encounter similar challenges (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009; Greason, Glaser, & Mroz, 2015) and stressors more unique to their creation process (Lipson, Zhou, Wagner, Beck, & Eisenberg, 2016; Thomas & Chan, 2013). To gain further understanding of the types of challenges Australian visual art students can encounter during their degree, this paper will now explore the research literature that describes the challenges that influence the wellbeing of art students.

Educational environments often support and nurture the unique creative expression of emerging artists. However, there is research literature that indicates how art student's creative voices can be silenced during their degrees (Seton & Trouton, 2014). The "organisational structure and culture" of higher education can interrupt the creative expression of emerging artists (Thomas & Chan, 2013, p. 262) or "privilege the power and voice" of teachers over students (Seton & Trouton, 2014, p. 95). This may present a concerning challenge for art students, given the creative expression of artist's unique voices can be considered an intrinsic motivator that is highly valued by the artists (Comunian, Faggian, & Li, 2010; Win, 2014).

Creative higher education can be a highly competitive environment where students experience harsh criticism of their work (Lipson et al., 2016). Art students can be vulnerable to harsh criticism and find it difficult to cope, given they can draw from private aspects of their life (Seton & Trouton, 2014) and engage in deep, raw emotions to produce their artwork (Lau, 2016). Through their unique creation processes, students can view their work as inherently linked to their personal identity (Eynde, Fisher, & Sonn, 2016). Hence, the impact on art students from experiencing harsh criticism can be exacerbated; particularly if the students have not acquired the psychological tools to cope with this criticism.

In broader social contexts, art students can adopt role expectations that they are outsiders who are pushed to the fringe of society (Daniel, 2016). Social role expectations may be reinforced by

romantic myths regarding the "solitary artist" (Win, 2014) or "mad genius" (Greason et al., 2015). According to Becker (2001), such myths derive from the time of Greek antiquity, where highly creative people were described as mad or possessed with power. Although these descriptions were initially seen as desirable, in the early 1800's researchers began exploring the link between creativity and "clinical madness" (Becker, 2014; Gwinner, Knox, & Hacking, 2009). Despite strong scepticism towards the quality of research regarding creativity and psychosis, media continue to support such myths because "madness sells" (Schlesinger, 2009, p. 70).

Stereotypes and myths influence the way some art students view the value of their work and how they contribute to society. For example, isolation is considered as a conditional sacrifice to demonstrate the "originality" of creative work (Lindauer, 2011; Røyseng, Mangset, & Borgen, 2007). This is concerning, given social isolation is a factor that can greatly impact an individual's mental health (Spaniol, 2001). Although certain research literature argues against assumption that artists are marginalised from society (Gwinner et al., 2009) there is evidence that art students can still view artists as "relatively misunderstood or marginalised" (Daniel, 2016, p. 25).

Art students can "overidentify" with mental health problems as a way of supporting social expectations (Greason et al., 2015). This provides a unique perspective on research that reports art students experiencing higher levels of mental ill-health than other university students (Larcombe, Finch, & Sore, 2015; Lipson et al., 2016; Naik & Sundaramoorthy, 2016). Art students have the power to accept or reject role expectations (Røyseng et al., 2007). However, if art students do accept role expectations, they can prioritise the role of the "suffering artist" over their own health (Rothenberg, 2001, p. 132). For example, artists can treat anxiety as an energy that can stimulate their creation process (Lau, 2016).

Other challenges that art students can encounter include what Cloonan (2008) describes as "anticipatory depression" regarding the precarious creative workforce they wish to enter. Like law students in Australia (Ryan, 2018), art graduates are required to enter into a highly competitive industry where core creative jobs are limited (Daniel & Johnstone, 2017). Recent Australian research indicates that on average, "one in five composers, community artists and visual artists" do not acquire a creative job until after three years has passed (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017, p. 44). This research also reports that roughly three quarters of practising artists are highly educated with

university degrees, yet their financial income is "far below those earnt by other qualified practitioners in other professions" (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017, p. 9).

The challenges that art students in general experience can influence the wellbeing of visual art students, specifically. Regardless of whether or not art students "over-identify" with mental ill health (Greason et al., 2015), research reporting high levels of mental health problems for these students (Larcombe et al., 2015; Lipson et al., 2016) suggests a necessity for intervention to protect their health. A content analysis of 35 Australian art courses indicates that this necessity may not currently be met within Australian higher education (Daniel & Johnstone, 2017). This Australian research found that only 11.4% of these courses focus on wellbeing and mental health in their course content (Daniel & Johnstone, 2017, p. 96).

Higher art education can help protect and enhance the wellbeing of visual art students by reconceptualising art curriculum to address their mental health needs. Given arts students can experience challenges that are unique to their creative practice (Seton & Trouton, 2014), it is possible that only university-wide approaches to enhancing students' wellbeing will not address their unique experience. However, by redesigning curriculum specifically to enhance the wellbeing of visual art students, they will be better equipped to manage the challenges they can experience both during their degree and after graduation. To explore ways that curriculum can be redesigned to intervene and protect students' mental health, Part Two will discuss examples of Australian curricula developed for students from specific disciplines.

Part Two: wellbeing intervention for university students

Australian university students' wellbeing can be cultivated and supported by intentionally designing curriculum to meet their mental health needs (Fernandez et al., 2016). As described by Baik et al. (2017, p. 17), curriculum is central to the student's experience. Curriculum has potential to support or undermine students' wellbeing by influencing their psychological resources, their development of relationships and awareness of challenges they might experience (Baik et al., 2017, p. 15). Hence, curriculum can help equip students with the "social, moral, emotional, and intellectual skills required to enhance and sustain individual wellbeing" (Lambert, Passmore, & Joshanloo, 2018, p. 2).

Higher education provides an ideal environment to enhance and sustain students' wellbeing (Carter et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2018). This could be achieved through a positive education framework, where both traditional educational skills and tools for students to flourish in life are taught (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015; White, 2016). Redesigning art curriculum to reflect a positive education framework requires committed leadership and the "remodelling of principles underpinning the approach" (Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011). However, these types of intervention do not require extensive resources and can ultimately help students develop "greater versions of themselves" (Lambert et al., 2018, p. 15).

One example of positive education curriculum is the Lawyering and Dispute Resolution subject, from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT, Field & Duffy, 2012). This first-year subject was designed for law students as a positive psychology scholarship of a hope framework (Field, 2014). During the subject, content was delivered to support students in developing their professional identity and build awareness of the challenges they might encounter in legal study. One assessment for this subject used reflective practice help establish "an emergent sense of professional identity" (Field, 2014, p. 34). The assessment requirements were that students hear the career story of a lawyer and write a 2000-word scholarly reflection to demonstrate an understanding of positive professional identity (Field & Duffy, 2012).

The Lawyering and Dispute Resolution subject has been run annually since 2011, demonstrating the sustainability and effectiveness of the curriculum. In 2014, this subject experienced a shift into core compulsory curriculum (Field, 2014). Positive feedback provided by students would have contributed to this change. Law students expressed an increase in engagement, motivation and wellbeing gained through a positive approach (Field & Duffy, 2012). Regardless of the "size" or impact of these positive experiences, Field and Duffy (2012, p. 141) posit that the higher education sector is ethically obligated to enhance the wellbeing of law students through legal curriculum.

The next example of wellbeing intervention is the Health Enhancement Program (HEP) (Hassed, Sierpina, & Kreitzer, 2008). This program is tailored for first-year medical students at Monash University in Australia. Two key components for this curriculum are the mindfulness program and the Education, Stress, Management, Spirituality, Exercise, Nutrition, Connectedness, and Environment (ESSENCE) lifestyle model (Hassed et al., 2009). Although the content can be integrated into curriculum for other university students (Baik et al., 2017), HEP students receive

content that is specifically relevant to clinical medicine. For example, medicine students are required to role-play in their exams and discuss how they can help a patient understand mindfulness-based stress management.

HEP demonstrates an effective and sustainable way to enhance medical students' wellbeing. For instance, the program has been a consistent part of core curriculum since 2002 (Hassed et al., 2008, refer to www.monash.edu for latest medical handbook). Since implementation, HEP has been systematically evaluated, revealing positive outcomes including students' increased quality of life (Fernandez et al., 2016, p. 803) and improved use of mindfulness practices (Hassed et al., 2009). Aspects of the mindfulness program have also been integrated into other undergraduate programs for various disciplines, across national and international universities (Baik et al., 2017, p. 32).

In the research literature, there is evidence of curricula designed to enhance the wellbeing of performing art students (Moyle, 2016; Osborne, Greene, & Immel, 2014). The Transitional Training Program (TTP), for example, was developed by staff at QUT in 2004 for first-year dance students (Huddy, 2016). This program applied performance psychology and career counselling, delivered "seamlessly" within curriculum to help students transition into their first year (Huddy, 2016, p. 31). Before final examination, students completed two performance psychology workshops to help them discuss stress and motivation regarding their exams (Huddy, 2016). Outcomes for this intervention were positive, with students reporting increased understanding of their career trajectories (Huddy, 2016).

However, there is limited mention of curriculum designed to enhance the wellbeing of art students who are not from performing art disciplines. To date, only one example has been found in the research literature. The *Interior Visualisation* subject, QUT, was designed for first-year architecture, engineering, fashion design, and interior design students (Baik et al., 2017, p. 33). This subject delivers four lectures over four weeks, providing students with an outline of four thinking styles (analytical, critical, reflective and design thinking) through design drawing and visualisation. Student feedback for this subject reported increased confidence, self-awareness, and deeper engagement—"particularly in completing the activities and assessment tasks" (Baik et al., 2017, p. 34).

A review of research literature indicates that there is a significant gap regarding wellbeing intervention for other visual art students enrolled in Australian universities. This review has found

that there is no higher education curriculum uniquely tailored to meet the wellbeing needs of these students. To date, evidence of wellbeing intervention for artists from visual artists disciplines has only been found in initiatives outside of the higher education sector (https://medium.com/never-not-creative). The *Never Not Creative* community provides a space for discussion and sharing of information to "improve the wellbeing of everyone in the industry and promote the value of creativity in the world" (Wright, 2018b). This community seeks to establish new standards within the creative industries through a pledge system and the development of resources including a mental health policy (Wright, 2018a).

There are still many opportunities for research to identify, develop and evaluate curriculum that can enhance the wellbeing of students learning other visual art disciplines. Such intervention can benefit students who are completing undergraduate degrees in areas like fine arts, illustration, design and digital media. However, developing effective and sustainable art curricula first requires a rigorous understanding of visual art students' wellbeing needs. A review of research literature indicates a lack of rigorous assessment in visual art students' wellbeing and mental health. This gap can be addressed through a needs assessment; a detailed process of "determining a community's needs" (Mertens, 2009, p. 109). Providing a needs assessment will help to guide academic educators to develop uniquely tailored curriculum that meets the wellbeing needs of visual art students.

Part Three: A wellbeing needs assessment of visual art students

To design curriculum that addresses the mental health and wellbeing needs of visual art students, an accurate assessment of their needs is required. Given visual art students can be marginalised during their education and in broader social contexts (Daniel, 2016; Seton & Trouton, 2014), developing a needs assessment for these students requires a research approach that empowers and validates each participant (Mertens, 2015). This can be achieved by adopting a theoretical framework that seeks to represent the voices of participants and involve them in the decision-making processes of the research. Part Three of this paper will discuss current, mixed methods research project called *Visual Arts Wellbeing* that has been designed with a transformative paradigm framework.

The purpose of Visual Arts Wellbeing is to develop a mental health and wellbeing needs assessment of visual art students in Australian higher education. To achieve a more complete

understanding of student mental health and wellbeing needs, this parallel mixed method research is gathering qualitative (interview) data and quantitative (survey) data. The priority for this research is not to diagnose mental health disorders, but to explore the students' current wellbeing and provide a series of recommendations derived from student perspectives; to inform future directions for curriculum reformation. To accurately represent the views of visual art students—and to enhance their wellbeing through reconceptualised curriculum—a transformative paradigm has been adopted.

Both the transformative paradigm, wellbeing and resilience theory have been used to shape the design of this parallel mixed methods research project. The transformative paradigm can be considered as an "umbrella" that mixes different paradigmatic perspectives (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The transformative paradigm supports multiple social theories, including positive psychology, wellbeing, and resilience theory (Seligman, 2011; Sweetman, Badiee, & Creswell, 2010; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). At times, these theories overlap. For example, the transformative paradigm, wellbeing, and resilience theory operate from a principle that the strengths of individuals need to be understood in order to find ways to improve their lives (Mertens, 2009; Seligman, 2011; Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

The wellbeing and resilience theory (Seligman, 2011; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011) have been used to inform the design of research methods. Application of this framework can provide an evidence-base that guides the development of intervention and helps students "achieve greater versions of themselves" (Lambert et al., 2018, p. 15). One purpose of wellbeing theory is to identify areas that are promising for intervention and positive change (Huppert & So, 2013). Similar to wellbeing theory, resilience theory seeks to identify what works best for people who are bouncing back from stressors—and to find times to use effective intervention that benefit people who are vulnerable to stressors (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Panter-Brick, 2015).

By adopting a transformative perspective for this research, visual art students' voices will be prioritised to construct an evidence base for future curriculum reform. The transformative paradigm allows the voices of an oppressed community to be heard, often by building trust through "interactional relationships" with participants (Egbo, 2005; Mertens, 2003). Therefore, this research seeks to engage visual art students in the decision-making process of future wellbeing intervention. Consulting students as "co-creators of learning" (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten,

2011, p. 134) can empower students to choose how their education enhances their own wellbeing; and the wellbeing of visual art students in the future. Such participation can dismantle educator's power privileges over their students, enabling the students to freely express their own voice (Bovill et al., 2011).

One way that this research reflects the theoretical framework is through initial engagement with art communities to develop ways of recruiting participants. To invite Australian visual art students to participate in this research, a variety of new media artwork was developed by members of an art community located in North Queensland. The members of this community include a variety of art students and graduates, who assisted in developing two animation videos and illustrations that are now available on the website: wellartist.org. The first animation provides general information about the research, whereas the second incorporates animation with a film of the author who directly invites art students to participate.

Members of Australian art communities were involved in all stages of developing these creative invitations to participate in the research. Preliminary advice regarding ways to achieve interest from art students was provided through meetings with visual art students from a university in North Queensland, and online discussions via a Facebook art student community. Once a script was written by the author, a team of two art practitioners and a current art student collaborated to create the visual and sound aspects of the animation. These animations evolved according to continued feedback offered at various stages by art students and graduates in Australia.

Involving members of the art community in the creative representation of this research has enriched the way it is viewed by visual art students. By providing highly visual, friendly communication, the animation videos can encourage art students to perceive the author as willing to establish and sustain their trust while advocating for change that can benefit them. The auditory message provided by the author may also help students feel empowered to be agents of change (Underhill & McDonald, 2010) who can influence the future of visual art education. For example, in the second video visual art students are directly invited to "be the key voice that drives any recommendation" provided in the author's research.

Conclusion

Visual art students should be viewed as equals who can greatly influence culture and society with their unique voices. Throsby and Petetskaya (2017, p. 16) argue that the creative arts (including visual arts) play a central role in our society and provide a "foundation on which cultural life depends". These visual art students can be seen as powerful, resilient, and active agents that can effect change in hope for a better future. Involving these students as central to the decision-making processes of research can transform the processes in which education staff develop curriculum to enhance their wellbeing and resilience. This is vital, given each student has a personal understanding of their own wellbeing and ways to enhance it.

Prioritising visual art student's opinions as the foundation for reconceptualising curriculum may provide sustainable, positive outcomes. For example, students with enhanced wellbeing can experience increased creative problem-solving skills (Lambert et al., 2018), increased learning, creativity and life satisfaction (Kern et al., 2015; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). By maintaining that students are central to decision-making processes, educators can build student's trust in newly reformed curriculum. In doing so, visual art students can engage more deeply with content that enhances their wellbeing and mental health (Bovill et al., 2011). This can positively impact each student's experience during their education—influencing their academic achievements, completion of their degree and transition into the workforce.

Acknowledgement

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