



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# Towards a health promoting university

Enhancing the student experience  
and academic outcomes  
A summary report



# BUPA Summary Report

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## MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF INVESTIGATOR

**I am pleased to present this summary report of the study our research team conducted into the factors affecting the health and wellbeing and academic outcomes of university students. The findings provide a unique insight into important aspects of student life.**

It is important to note that the results of this study were generated in early 2019 before the advent of COVID-19. University students now have additional challenges. Yet, the complexities of transitioning to university during young adulthood, with its demands and responsibilities are ever relevant.

The results of this study create a baseline for our understanding of the nature and extent of students' challenges against which future follow-ups, including during a pandemic era, can be compared. This study is a first step in understanding how challenges vary over a

students' time at university and to identifying whether interventions put in place to assist students are working. This research has relevance globally as university students around the world face similar challenges.

Our research team would like to thank all the students at the University of Melbourne who took part in this study and other stakeholders, including student committees, who assisted in developing the survey. We would also like to acknowledge the support and partnership of the BUPA Health Foundation (BHF) in this study.

**Professor Lena Sanci**  
Lead researcher

## RESEARCH TEAM

**Lena Sanci, Patty Chondros, Laura Tarzia, Ann-Maree Duncan, Divya Peter, Madeleine Lim,** and **Ian Williams** from the Department of General Practice of the Melbourne Medical School in the Faculty of Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne

**Harry Minas** and **Pragya Gartoulla** from the Global and Cultural Mental Health Unit in the Centre for Mental Health, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne

**Melissa Russell**, Centre of Epidemiology and Biostatistics from the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne

For details of the full report please contact the Chief Investigator, Professor Lena Sanci [lena.sanci@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lana.sanci@unimelb.edu.au)

# Introduction

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**There has been growing focus in recent times on the mental health of university students, and the impact of poor mental health on their academic outcomes and experiences.**

Heightened vulnerability to mental health problems during the years of tertiary study is evident globally, and is perhaps unsurprising given commencing university is often a major life transition. For some, beginning at university is associated with homesickness, pressure to succeed, difficulty balancing academic workloads with other responsibilities, financial pressures and worries about future debt.

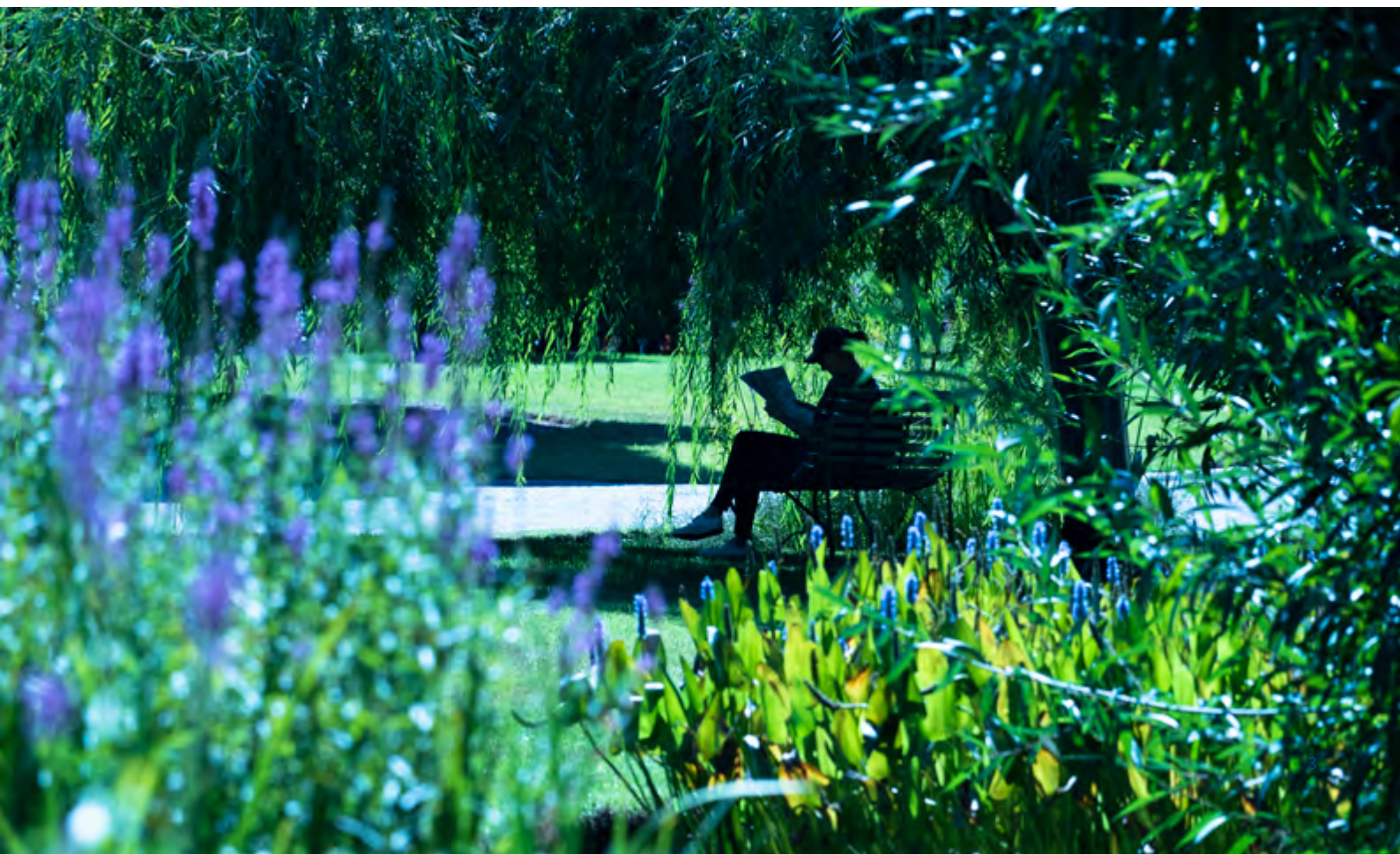
International students may have increased vulnerability to mental health problems during their university years due to additional challenges such as social isolation, language proficiency, discrimination, lack of familiarity with local health services, and experiences of stigma around mental health issues.

Universities are increasingly being recognised as settings in which the health and wellbeing of young people can be promoted in ways that maximise academic outcomes, support successful career transitions and establish lifelong positive health behaviours.

To progress our understanding of how Australian universities can best promote student health and wellbeing, there has been a call for more Australian research into the factors affecting students, and the relationship between academic and mental health outcomes. In response, researchers from the University of Melbourne partnered with the BUPA Health Foundation in the ***Towards a Health Promoting University study***.

The study investigates issues impacting student mental health and wellbeing, academic outcomes, and service awareness and use. It identifies priority areas for possible intervention, and informs a whole-of-university student mental health and wellbeing promotion and intervention strategy.

The study also establishes important baseline data for future follow-up of this group of students to see how mental health and wellbeing vary over time and to identify factors that predict students faring well and not so well. In this way interventions can be better targeted to those with early warning signs of distress.



# Study at a glance

- Online survey designed to be completed by all students at the University of Melbourne
- Measures of wellbeing were chosen after literature review of studies of health and wellbeing of international students
- Student working groups contributed to survey refinement and helped shape student recruitment approaches
- All 56,000+ University of Melbourne students over 18 years of age and enrolled in March–April 2019 were invited to participate
- Most participants also gave researchers consent to confidentially link their academic results to their survey responses

## SURVEY MEASURES



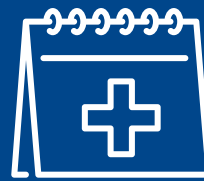
### Health indicators

Mental health, general health, risk taking behaviours, and psychosocial stressors including homesickness, pressure to perform academically, fear, abuse or violence



### Social and cultural impacts on health and academic performance

Social connectedness, study styles and skills, cultural values, discrimination, financial and housing security, hours of paid work per week



### Awareness of and access to health and wellbeing services

University services, community-based services, online services, barriers to access



### Academic performance

Average subject scores, failed subjects, academic stressors

## ABOUT THE STUDENTS WHO COMPLETED THE SURVEY

**56,375**  
Students invited  
to take part

**14,880**  
Responded

**26%**  
Response rate

**63.9%**  
Female

**35.6%**  
Male

**0.5%**  
Self-described

**24 years**  
Mean age

Range:  
18–80 years

**67%**  
Local students\*

**33%**  
International  
students\*

**1.4%**  
Local students  
identified as  
Aboriginal or Torres  
Strait Islander

**Broadly representative of university population by year of study, course, and faculty**

**\*International student:** holds an Australian temporary resident-student visa; has crossed an international border to participate in educational activities in Australia  
**Local student:** Australian or overseas born student (Australian citizen or permanent resident, or holds an Australian temporary resident – bridging visa)

# Summary findings

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## Prevalence of stressors

One in three students reported experiencing stressors at university, often associated with poorer mental health and lower academic outcomes.

## Connection to academic performance

Overall, poor mental health is associated with lower academic performance.

## Comparative experiences of local and international students

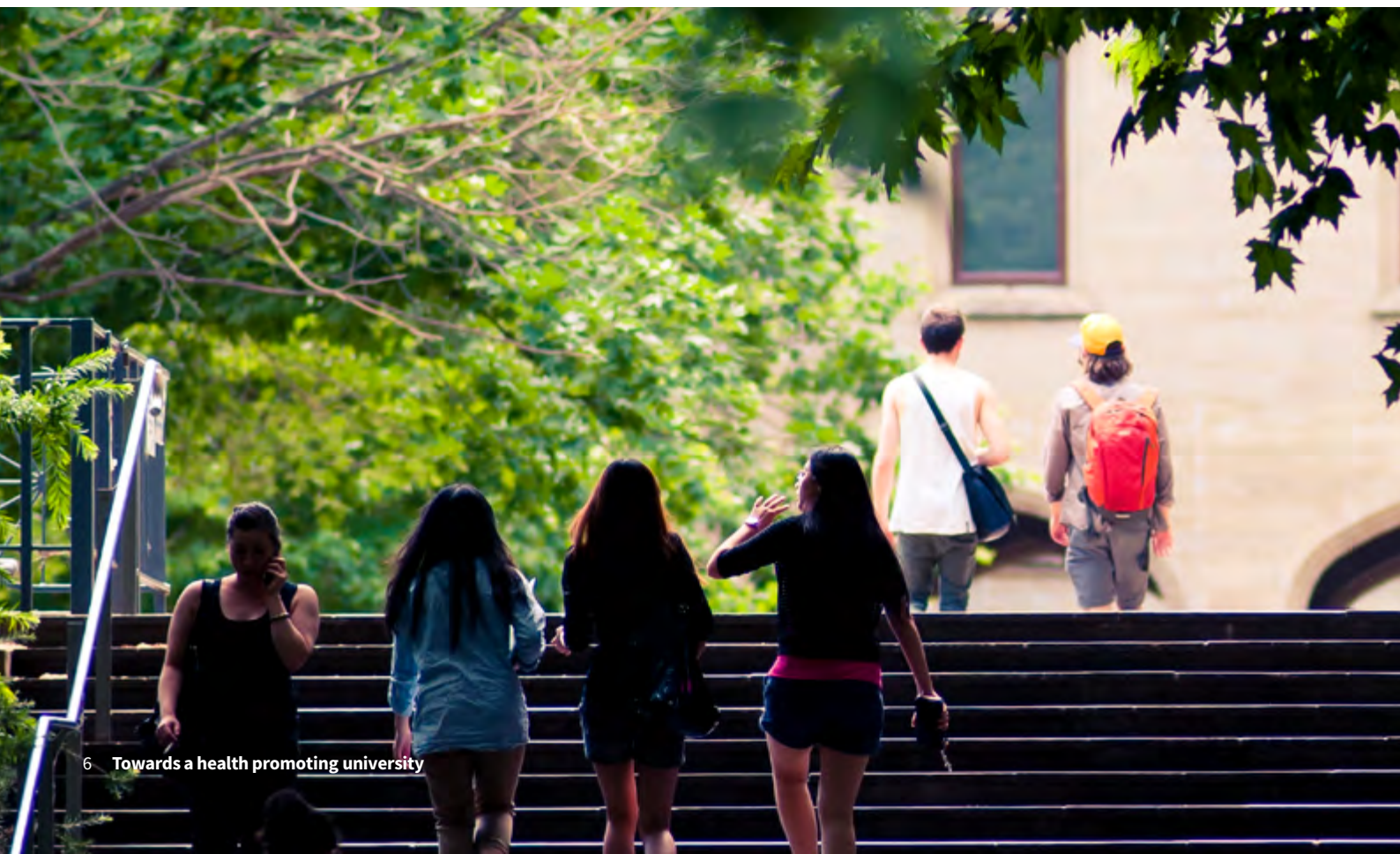
While previous studies suggest international students experience increased mental ill-health, sexual violence, discrimination, financial stress, and academic stressors, findings showed many of these issues are experienced by similar, and sometimes higher, proportions of local students.

## Health service awareness

International students and local students both experience challenges to their mental health and wellbeing, however international students are generally less aware of health services than local students. Among those reporting symptoms of mental ill health this remains the case, with local students both more aware of and more likely to access support services compared to international students. International students use University health services more, and external services far less, than local students.

## Added stressors for international students

Difficulties for international students might also be made worse by fewer social supports, the stress of adapting to a new culture, English language difficulties and higher levels of discrimination.

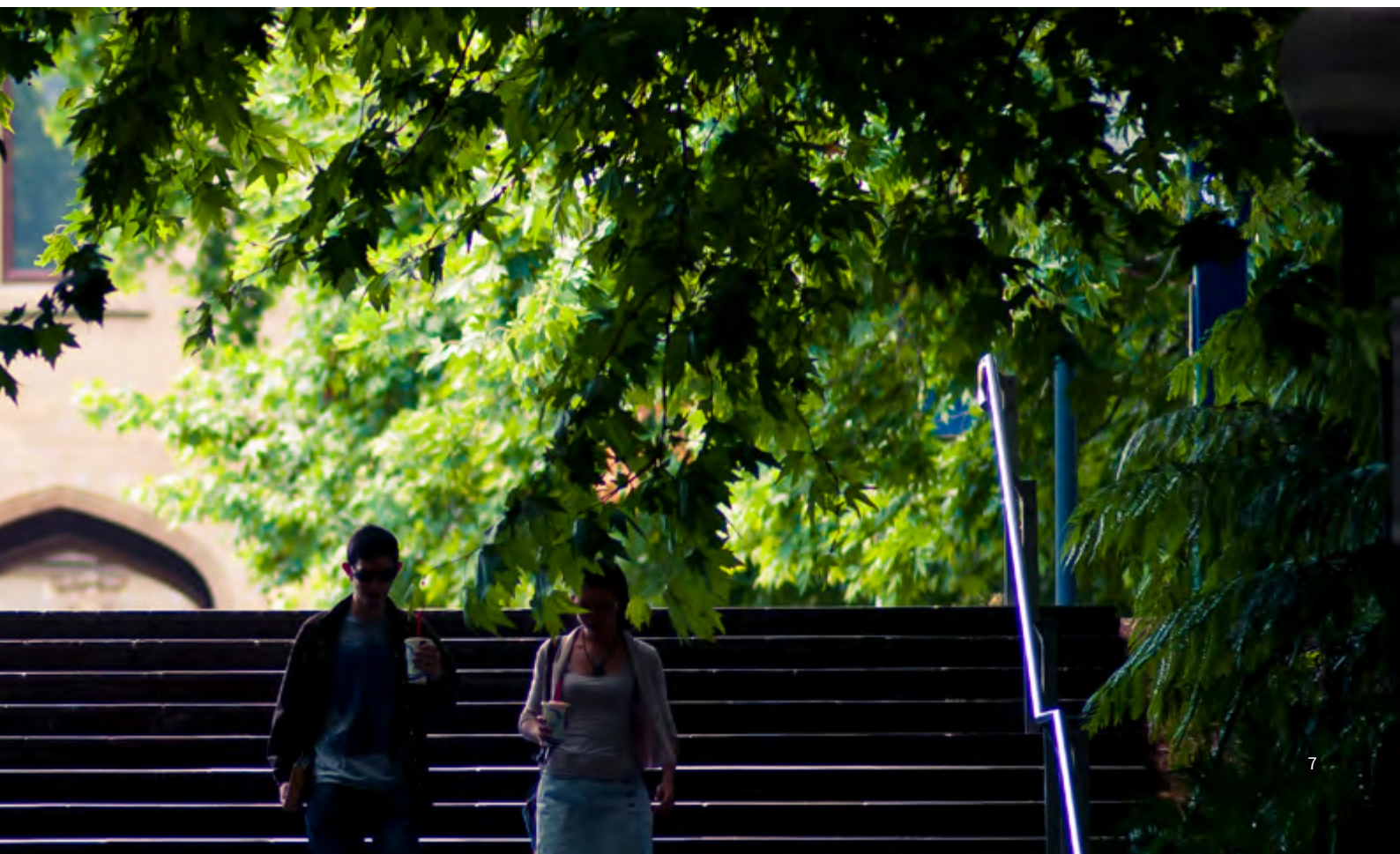


# Key recommendations

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**The findings from this Australian study build on those from similar studies in other countries, and support the need for universities to:**

1. Develop comprehensive student mental health and well-being strategies
2. Improve accessibility and acceptability of existing student mental health services, and increase their capacity to respond to student needs
3. Develop coherent and strategic research capacity to support policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of student mental health and wellbeing and effectiveness of university programs and services
4. Develop student information systems that support early recognition and targeted and effective responses to students who are at risk of, or are already experiencing, decline in their mental health and academic performance



# Detailed findings

## General health and wellbeing

- 80% of students rated their general health as good, very good or excellent with local and international students' ratings comparable.
- 18% of local students reported a chronic health condition or disability compared to 9% of international students.
- One third of students were an unhealthy weight with local students more likely to be overweight or obese, and more international students underweight.
- Only 7% of international and 13% of local students ate the recommended five or more servings of vegetables each day, and 43% of international and 52% of local students ate the recommended daily servings of two pieces of fruit.
- One in four local students and one in five international students did the recommended 30 minutes of moderate exercise on five or more days each week.

## Mental health

- While most students were doing well on measures of mental health, around 80% of both local and international students reported feeling at least a little concern about their current mental or emotional state. Slightly more local than international students were a great deal concerned (8% compared to 5%).
- More than one in five students reported a current mental disorder (27% local compared to 14% international).
- Depressive symptoms in the past two weeks as measured with the nine-item Patient Health Questionnaire 9 (PHQ9) were experienced at similar percentages by local and international students with approximately 30% experiencing at least moderate symptoms and approximately 14% experiencing symptoms suggesting a moderately severe or severe depressive disorder
- Anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks as measured with the seven-item General Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7) were reported at a moderate-severe level for 26% of local students and 20% of international students.
- Five percent of all students reported episodes of self-harm or attempted suicide within the past 12 months.
- The prevalence of probable eating disorder (anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa) was 22% for both local and international students.

## Substance use

- 61% of local students reported hazardous alcohol use during the past year compared to 31% of international students.
- 12% of all students had used tobacco in the last 12 months but of those who smoked, more international students smoked every day (35% international compared to 20% local).
- 25% of local students reported illicit drug use during the past year compared to 6% of international students.

## Friendships and social support

- On average, students reported high levels of social support .
- Nearly half of international students said their main friendship group was mostly international students from their home country, with 20% identifying a mix of local and international students as their main friendship group and 7% reporting no group of friends in Australia.
- Over half of all students were involved in organised social, sporting or recreational groups either at university or elsewhere.
- 43% of all students experienced loneliness while at university.
- 26% of international students and 11% of local students experienced homesickness.

## Social environment

- Social media use led to at least a little stress in 70% of students, with around 15% saying it caused a lot or a great deal of stress.
- 29% of local students and 16% of international students experienced family difficulties.
- One in five students experienced relationship issues.
- Travelling or commuting difficulties were a problem for almost one in four students and particularly affected local students (29%) compared to 11% of international students.
- Homelessness in the previous year was experienced by 4% of international students and 2% of local students.



# Detailed findings (cont.)

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## Cultural factors

- Over half of all students reported experiencing some form of discrimination in the wider community outside the university, while just over one quarter reported discrimination at the University.
- International students who reported discrimination said it was mainly due to race or ethnicity, while local students reported discrimination mainly due to gender.

## Financial issues

- 28% of all students reported financial stress, with more local students (31%) reporting financial concerns compared to international students (21%).
- Stressors included food and medicine affordability, where one in ten students could not afford to buy food and/or prescribed medication at some point during the past 12 months.

## Sexuality and sexual health

- Almost two thirds of students had sexual intercourse in the past 12 months.
- Of those students just over half of international students (54%) compared to a third of local students (32%) reported always using a condom.
- The most common forms of contraception used during the last sexual encounter were condoms (used by 72% of international and 52% of local students) and the contraceptive pill (used by 37% of local and 18% of international students).
- The most common form of sex education was from friends (reported by 85% local and 52% international students).

## Sexual and intimate partner violence

- About 30% of the 12,250 students who responded to a question about sexual violence or intimate partner violence reported they had been a victim of unwanted or uninvited sexual touching at some point in their lives.
- Around 8% of students reported experiencing forced sex at some point in their life.
- Of all students who had ever been in an adult intimate relationship, 23% reported having been afraid of a partner, with around 9% reporting fear of a partner in the past 12 months.

## Health service awareness, use and barriers

- Most students were aware of the University's Health Service and Academic Skills Unit.
- Around two thirds of local students and less than half of international students were aware of the University's counselling and psychological services.
- Of those students experiencing mental health issues, local students were far more aware of university counselling and psychological services than were international students and were also more likely to access health services for mental health concerns.
- Barriers to general health care access were experienced by nearly 10% of international and 7% of local students.
- The most common barriers for both groups were cost, appointment availability, limited opening hours, personal or family responsibilities, and uncertainty about who to see. Language problems were also reported as a barrier by international students.
- Almost a quarter of students reported barriers to accessing mental health care. Cost was most commonly cited as a factor by students overall, followed by uncertainty about who to see. International students also reported language problems.

# Detailed findings (cont.)

## Learning and academic factors

- Weighted Average Mean (WAM) scores show local and international students performed similarly in Semester 1, 2019.
- Less than one in ten students failed any subjects.
- Over one quarter of all students had considered dropping out of their course in the past 12 months.
- The most common reasons cited for this were health/stress, balancing study and life, and workload.
- Academic stressors, including time management, work/life/study balance, pressure to succeed and exam anxiety were experienced by all students, with higher proportions generally found among local students.

## Student factors associated with mental ill-health

Students reporting depression or anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks were more likely to have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Self-described gender
- Experiencing academic pressure or considering dropping out
- Unable to afford food or medicine
- Spending six or more hours a day on social media
- Experiencing any forms of discrimination
- Rating their own health as fair or poor
- Having a chronic health condition
- Reporting past attempts at self-harm
- Reporting symptoms of eating disorder
- Use of substances, including tobacco, hazardous alcohol use, and/or other drugs
- Experiencing sexual violence or intimate partner abuse
- Stress adapting to a new culture

Students were less likely to report depression or anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks if they had one or more of the following characteristics:

- Being male
- Aged 23 years or above
- Being an international student
- Having paid employment
- Being physically active
- Sleeping six hours or more each night
- English proficiency self-rated as good to excellent (only International students were asked)

## Mental health factors associated with academic performance

- Overall there was a notable relationship between mental health issues and academic performance, with students who reported mental health issues also experiencing poorer academic performance.
- Students with elevated symptoms of depression or self-harm in the past two weeks, or suicide attempts in the last 12 months were more likely to have failed a subject in the corresponding semester and to have lower WAM scores on average.
- Students with elevated anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks also showed increased odds of academic failure and lower WAM scores on average.
- These trends were similar for international and local students and across years of study.

# Concluding comments

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**This study involved a university-wide survey investigating the complexities of transitioning to university life during young adulthood, with its various demands and responsibilities. Findings reveal important patterns in the wellbeing, mental health and academic outcomes of students, as well as indicating potential areas for intervention to further enhance the student experience and progress steps towards a health promoting university.**

This study is unique in its high response rate, representation of the university student population, and in its simultaneous examination of local and international student issues in the same cohort. This is important as universities move toward a whole-of-university approach to promoting the wellbeing of all students, while still understanding risk factors for specific subgroups where more tailored approaches may be required. The study also offers valuable insights into associations between mental health and academic performance, with survey results linked to academic records for the majority of participating students.

The *Towards a health promoting university* study was designed to address key knowledge gaps concerning student life in an Australian context. The study also set out to determine how international and local students compare on indicators of health, wellbeing and academic performance and thereby add to the global understanding of students' health profiles and the need for health promotion, and improved support and services. Finally, the study provides baseline data for future follow up of the student cohort, which will help identify factors that influence drop out, adverse health, mental health, and academic outcomes, as well as guiding evaluation of health promotion programs and services.

The following page lists some resources that are available to assist students who may be experiencing any of the issues highlighted in this survey.

# Health and wellbeing resource list for University students

## Should you need support for any of the issues mentioned in these findings, the following services may be of assistance:

- **University of Melbourne COVID-19 Student Advice and Support:**  
<https://students.unimelb.edu.au/student-support/coronavirus>
- **University of Melbourne COVID-19 financial support:**  
<https://students.unimelb.edu.au/student-support/coronavirus/financial-support>
- **University of Melbourne Safer Community Program:**  
<https://safercommunity.unimelb.edu.au>
- **Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS), University of Melbourne:** The University of Melbourne Counselling and Psychological Services provides free, confidential, short-term professional counselling to currently enrolled students and staff.  
Phone: +61 (3) 8344 6927  
<https://services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel>
- **University of Melbourne Health Service:** Provides health care for both local and international students, staff and their dependents. The Health Service offers experienced medical doctors and nurses, with a depth of knowledge relevant to student mental health and other medical issues.  
Phone: +61 (3) 8344 6904  
<https://services.unimelb.edu.au/finder/home>
- **Lifeline:** 24-hour, free call telephone counselling for all ages.  
Phone: 13 11 14  
<http://www.lifeline.org.au>
- **Reachout:** A website for young people going through 'tough times'.  
<http://www.reachout.com.au>
- **The National Domestic Violence Phone Helpline for victims and perpetrators of violence:**  
Phone: 1800 200 526
- **Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre Victoria:** Provides information and referral to local services and support groups (but not counselling).  
Phone: +61 (3) 9486 9866  
<http://www.dvrcv.org.au>
- **CASA – Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault:**  
Phone: 1800 806 292 (24 hours)
- **1800 RESPECT:** Provides 24 hour, 7 days a week counselling, information and support.  
Phone: 1800 737 732  
<https://www.1800respect.org.au>
- **Nurse-on-Call:** Provides free health advice and information from a registered nurse, 24 hours, 7 days/week.  
Phone: 1300 60 60 24
- **Switchboard:** A free telephone and web counselling, referral and information service for the Victorian and Tasmanian lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) communities and their supporters.  
Phone: 1800 184 527  
Chat online: QLife Webchat  
<http://www.switchboard.org.au>



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