A SHORT REPORT SUMMARISING DOCTORATE RESEARCH:

The Visual Arts Wellbeing Project

This short report summarises a PhD thesis, *The Visual Arts Wellbeing Project: A Wellbeing Needs Assessment of Visual Art Students in Australian Universities*. The report is written and designed for students, artists, academics, and members of the creative arts and university community who have an interest in Australian visual art students' wellbeing. The research methods, analysis, findings, and recommendations are briefly summarised here.

For in-depth details about the research, you can download the PhD thesis and other research reports from: **www.wellartist.org/resources**. This site provides links to additional resources, including two short reports that have been designed to share participants' comments from the research:

1. *Visual Art Student Perspectives on Wellbeing and the University Experience*
2. *Visual Art Student Perspectives on Resilience and Enhancing Wellbeing at University*

The Visual Arts Wellbeing (VAW) research project developed a needs assessment of Australian visual art undergraduate students' mental health, resilience, and wellbeing. This research collected student perspectives on how the university experience influenced their wellbeing. Additionally, the research gathered students' proposed ways to foster resilience and support visual art students' wellbeing at university.

To understand students' wellbeing needs in educational contexts, a key question was asked: **How can visual art students' current wellbeing be improved and sustained during their higher education?** In 2018 and 2019, data were gathered from Australian visual art students to answer this question, through a 15-20-minute online survey and 30-60-minute semi-structured interviews. Over 200 visual art undergraduate students participated in the survey and 29 were interviewed. The data collection and participant demographics are displayed next.

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VISUAL ARTS WELLBEING

ONLINE SURVEY

COLLECTED DATA ON: visual art students' wellbeing, resilience, psychological distress, comparison with others, coping strategies, and proposed educational changes to support student mental health and wellbeing.

SURVEY PARTICIPANT INFORMATION (**n=247**)

201	Female
36	Male
3	Prefer not to say
7	Prefer to self-describe[1]

AGE GROUPS

3	15-17 years
170	18-24 years
43	25-34 years
12	35-44 years
10	45-54 years
8	55-64 years
1	65-74 years

LOCATION (AUSTRALIA)

15	ACT
47	NSW
68	QLD
30	SA
26	TAS
44	VIC
17	WA

VISUAL ART DISCIPLINES[2]

100	**103**	**35**
Drawing, paint, ceramics, printmaking, textiles and fashion	Design including graphic, game, and interactive design	Other new media including digital illustration, film, and animation

INTERVIEWS

COLLECTED DATA ON: visual art students' perspectives regarding how university experiences influenced wellbeing, students' coping strategies, and recommended changes to support student wellbeing at university.

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION (**n=29**)

20	Female
8	Male
1	Non-binary

AGE GROUPS

13	18-24 years
10	25-34 years
1	35-44 years
4	45-54 years
1	55-64 years

LOCATION (AUSTRALIA)

0	ACT
4	NSW
16	QLD
1	SA
1	TAS
5	VIC
2	WA

VISUAL ART DISCIPLINES[2]

10	**12**	**7**
Drawing, paint, ceramics, printmaking, textiles and fashion	Design including graphic, game, and interactive design	Other new media including digital illustration, film, and animation

1. Self-descriptions included agender (**1**), androgynous/queer (**1**), ftm male (**1**), gender fluid (**1**), and non-binary (**3**).
2. Participants primarily identified with a range of disciplines that are loosely sorted into these three visual art categories. A full account of participants' discipline demographics can be found in the PhD thesis.

The rich and meaningful data shared by survey and interview participants were analysed by using applied thematic analysis. As outlined in the graphics above, the online survey collected data on students' wellbeing, resilience, and psychological distress. These data were collected through three scales, the PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016), Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008), and the self-administered K6 scale (Kessler et al., 2002). Descriptive statistical analysis was used to calculate the scale results, which are presented in the graphs below. The internal consistency of all scales is outlined in the research thesis, along with additional scale details. As these graphs demonstrate, the survey participants' wellbeing and resilience levels were lower than validation samples, indicating a need for educational transformation to better support visual art students' wellbeing and foster their resilience.

THE SURVEY SCALE FINDINGS

AVERAGE PERMA PROFILER RESULTS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS[a] (**n=247**) COMPARED TO THE COMBINED VALIDATION SAMPLE (BUTLER & KERN, 2016, **n=31,966**)
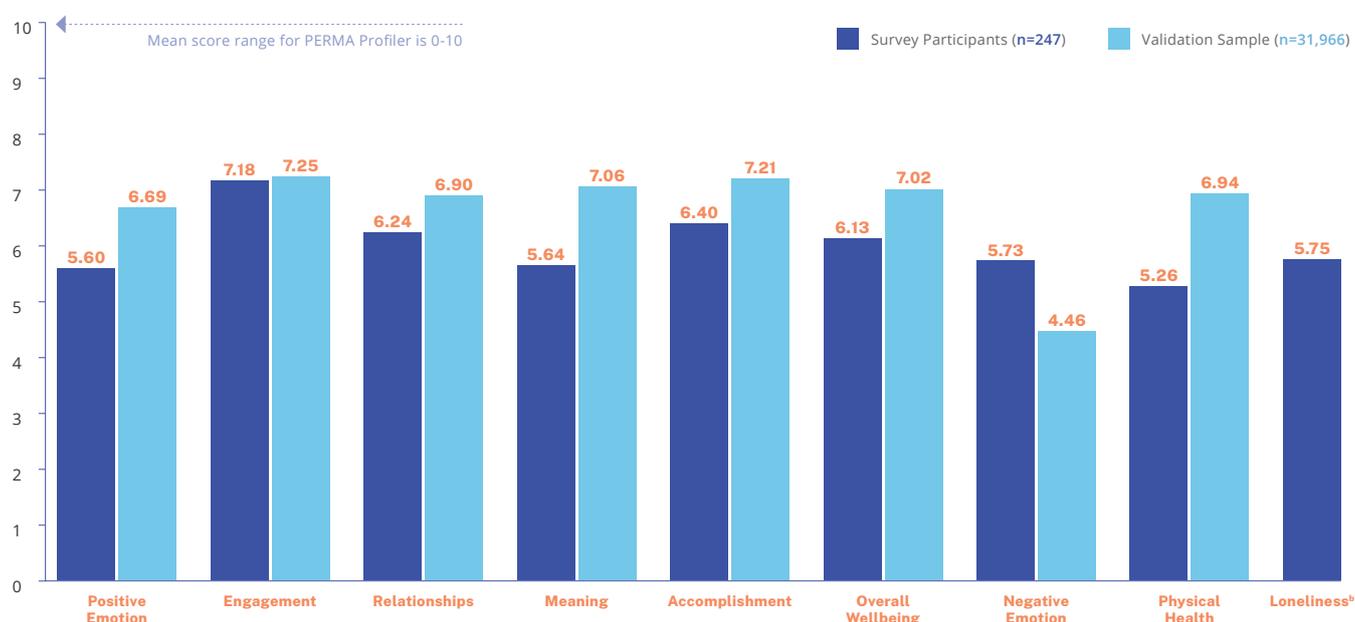
a. The PERMA Profiler does not have clearly defined score categories that can be used to compare findings. This scale was designed to encourage a description of participants' wellbeing and prevent prescriptive identification of wellbeing difficulties (Butler & Kern, 2016). Given this scale is skewed towards the positive end (P. Kern, personal communication, April 26, 2018), these participants could be described as having sub-optimal functioning in all domains, bar Engagement.
b. The Loneliness domain is not comprehensively listed in the validation sample findings.

AVERAGE BRS RESULTS[a] OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS
(**n=243**) COMPARED TO VALIDATION SAMPLE (**n=128**)

Low Resilience | Average Resilience | High Resilience

Survey Participants — **Mean = 2.87**

Validation Sample[b] — **Mean = 3.53**

1 2 3 4 5
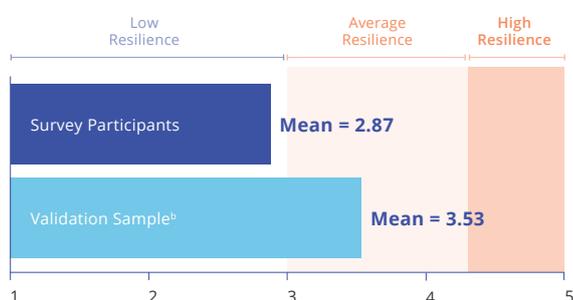
a. BRS scores below 3.00 are categorised as Low Resilience, scores between
3.00 and 4.30 are categorised as Average Resilience, scores above 4.30 are
categorised as High Resilience (Smith et al., 2013).
b. The validation sample is the first of three samples detailed by Smith et al. in
their validation study (2008). The chosen sample's average score was the lowest
of all samples.

K6 RESULTS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS (**n=244**)
SORTED BY DICHOTOMOUS SCORE CATEGORIES:
NO PROBABLE MENTAL ILL-HEALTH, AND
PROBABLE MENTAL ILL-HEALTH[a]

No Probable Mental Ill-health — **n=143 (57.89%)**

Probable Mental Ill-health — **n=101 (40.89%)**

0 50 100 150 200 250
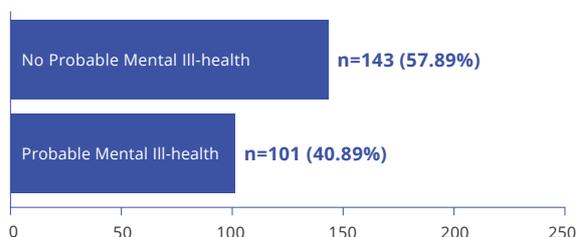
a. The Australian dichotomous K6 scores categories were used for this
comparison. Participants (n=143) scoring between 6 and 18 were sorted into the
No Probable Mental Ill-Health category. Participants (n=101) scoring between 19
and 30 were sorted into Probable Mental Ill-Health (Kessler et al., 2010).

OTHER DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

The remaining data that were collected consisted of participants' written or spoken responses. These responses were sorted into narrative themes that represent visual art students' diverse opinions and experiences relevant to their wellbeing within university contexts. A summary of these themes is displayed on **page 5**. Although the participants' written and spoken responses are not presented,[3] this report summarises qualitative findings from the Comparison theme. A wealth of student perspectives described challenges regarding how students' creativity and artwork were compared. Although some students did not worry about how their artwork was assessed, many felt self-conscious or confronted and some viewed their artwork as a vulnerable extension of their personality. A range of these insights were gathered from the 216 participant responses to the first short response question,[4] asking about social concerns and comparison. Their responses are visualised below.

VISUALISATION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANT (**n=216**)
ANSWERS TO THE FIRST SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION[a]

68.98% Worry

21.30% Don't worry

9.72% Described times when do and do not worry

a. The first short response question: Do you spend much time worrying about what people
at university and in the broader art community think of you and your art?

3. The two *Visual Art Student Perspectives* reports listed **above** contribute a descriptive narrative of students' university
    experiences through the collection of participant comments gathered from the research.
4. The first short response question was: Do you spend much time worrying about what people at university and in the broader
    art community think of you and your art?

WHAT STUDENTS SPOKE ABOUT[5]

General views on
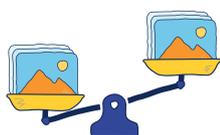students' wellbeing
and university

Relationships with
staff and peers

Time and time-
management
strategies

Benefits and
challenges of
creative learning

Comparison of
students' creativity
and artwork
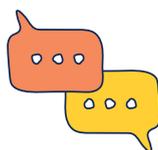
Views on career
trajectories and life
after graduation

How the university
experience
influenced wellbeing

Cognitive strategies
used to cope with
university challenges

Behavioural strategies
used to cope with
university challenges

Social strategies
used to cope with
university challenges

Proposed changes
to benefit a larger
body of students

Proposed changes
to benefit students'
preparation for work

Proposed changes
to how art is taught
and assessed

5. These graphics provide a general summary of narrative themes to allow one or many possible understandings about the qualitative findings. The graphics are not inclusive of all themes and codes, but provide insights regarding participants' written or spoken responses to survey and interview questions.

The evidence presented in the thesis and research publications shows that visual art students can benefit from wellbeing strategies that enable and protect their wellbeing. These strategies can be implemented within university contexts, yet need to be diverse and multi-levelled to accommodate the complexity of each cohorts' unique demographics, experiences, creative aspirations, and perspectives.

Students and academic staff play a critical role in educational reform. However, positive wellbeing-framed transformation will be arguably more sustainable and effective through the collaborative efforts of all higher education, creative art, and mental health community members, including key stakeholders. A list briefly summarising relevant research recommendations is presented below.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase support and training for university staff. Improve support service accessibility and services, provide specialised support for art students and access to online services. Explore ways to improve self-care, support, and communication between professional support staff and university staff. Increase mental health literacy training opportunities for teaching staff.

Reassess current curricula within the context of current student demographics and feedback, industry standards, and research on wellbeing intervention. Ensure that curricula are explicitly coherent, transparent, and supportive of learning objectives. Examine the interspersion, facilitation, and grading of assessment to prevent disempowering, uncomfortably evocative, or disengaging content.

Implement wellbeing-enabling intervention into curricula. Weave wellbeing-framed learning—that is relevant to the visual art student experience—into curricula, co-curricular, and other forms of creative learning. Ensure that this learning is meaningful, empowering, and provides increased options for students to practice their art during class and through assessment.

Clarify student expectations of their degree. Provide clear and open communication about the culture and aspects of creative learning that commencing art students will experience, including learning objectives, the teachers' duty of care, student conduct, and other learning responsibilities.

Foster creative communities through peer and industry engagement. Provide supportive and inclusive opportunities for students to cultivate communities of practice. Increase peer mentoring and discussions about the university experience. Improve management of group assessment. Increase industry engagement through guest visits, field trips, work experience opportunities, and networking events.

While considering significant economic changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the research recommendations presented above are considered timely. Creative arts education and the creative arts workforce will continue to be impacted by the pandemic, and visual art students will arguably need to navigate increased financial burdens, decreased job opportunities, and increased levels of isolation and mental health difficulty (Siddins, 2021). These challenges necessitate further intervention and training in Australian art education to promote visual art students' resilience and wellbeing. It is thus the responsibility, and challenge, for Australian universities to cultivate positive, engaging, and safe learning experiences for students. Such positive transformation can better equip and prepare future visual art leaders for the challenges they can experience at university, and after they graduate from their degrees.

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