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HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK ENHANCES CAMPUS LIFE

Having a safe foundation to go forward and form close friendships, exercise autonomy and develop new life skills are some of the bonuses that come with living on campus at Deakin University, but transitioning to campus life can present mental health challenges for some students.

“There’s homesickness, pressure to form new friendships and increased responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning and paying bills while balancing part-time work commitments.”

In order to increase social connection and a sense of belonging, Deakin Residential Services use a student experience framework to enhance the mental health and emotional wellbeing of students living on campus.

Core elements of the framework include education about safe behaviours, life skills and personal welfare, facilitating events and activities that build community engagement, and the provision of leadership training programs, all designed to support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of students in a holistic way.



To facilitate this, an induction process for residential students was launched via an online platform in 2018. Instead of getting students to read and sign a code of conduct form, residential students use the interactive platform to complete the induction program and pass a comprehension test before receiving a key to their new home on campus.

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RESPECT at Deakin Residential Services

Image: DeakinRes

Far from being a box-ticking exercise, videos provide engaging, university-aligned content on topics ranging from consent to respectful relationships. An online forum enables students to chat and connect with staff and other students so they can spark new friendships before arriving on campus.

“The online induction means students know what’s expected of them and what they can expect of us, before they’ve even arrived on campus,” says Laura, who adds that the general themes and values covered in the induction mirror those of the university.

Before moving to the Waurn Ponds campus to begin a Bachelor of Psychology/Criminology, 19-year-old Kyra Byrne completed the online induction process.

“The online induction helped me to learn about the residential community’s values ... it also made me feel less nervous about moving on campus and made the overall transition from home much easier,” comments Kyra.

“The online induction made me feel less nervous about moving on campus and made the overall transition from home much easier.”

KYRA BYRNE, UNIVERSITY STUDENT

CHAMPIONING COMMUNITY VALUES

Clear guidance on behavioural expectations is required to ensure a diverse range of students can live and study together in safety and harmony. But how do universities communicate and uphold values without setting draconian rules?

A guiding principle of the Deakin Mental Health Strategy is to take a student-centred approach. The team believes that involving students in the development and ongoing application of the values has been crucial to their acceptance.

After many conversations with students and staff, the RESPECT (Responsive, Encouraging, Safe and Secure, Proactive, Enjoyable, Connected and Tolerant) Values were agreed upon. These values provide the structure and guidelines needed to foster connectedness, inclusion and belonging – all key contributors to enhanced mental health and wellbeing.

“It might sound corny, but the RESPECT Values aren’t just a statement on the wall that says ‘this is our values’. We genuinely refer to it in everything we do,” says Laura.

Annual evaluation via student surveys confirms the values have currency with the residential student population. The answers to the survey are used to calculate an aggregated score called the RESPECT Index, which has increased each year for the past three years.

“This means we’ve got increased awareness and understanding of the values – tangible evidence that the values do make a difference in the community,” says Laura.

BETTER TOGETHER

Student involvement is a core tenet of the residential experience at Deakin, with some students allocated leadership roles. Residential Leaders live in the community and play an important role in noticing students who might be at risk of developing anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns.

Typically in their second year (or above), student leaders perform the voluntary role after completing a comprehensive training program that includes mental health first aid and bystander intervention courses.

“During my first year, having a residential leader around to answer questions and help me was amazing. They put so much effort into creating a beautiful sense of community,” says Kyra, who has since become a residential leader herself.

“Being in a wheelchair, I’m sometimes unable to participate in the same capacity as others. On one occasion, my residential leader noticed that I was struggling with this and offered to participate in an alternate activity with me.

“This made me feel accepted and seen, highlighting to me very early on that I was in the right place and that I belonged.”

An important way to identify mental health concerns before they snowball, the role of a student leader isn't to manage crises or provide services, but inform Campus Life staff who can then connect residents with support services such as counselling.

“We want to ensure that students are holistically supported within the residential environment. University counselling services tend to operate during business hours, whereas our students are with us 24/7. So we want to make sure that if they're having an issue at 2am, we can help them,” says Laura.

Campus Life staff work closely with the university's student services team. Laura sees firsthand how this collaborative, cooperative relationship promotes positive outcomes for residential students.

“The university has a great response network when something goes wrong, but we do everything we can to have the social fabric in place before it gets to that point.”

“ We want to make sure that if students are having an issue at 2am, we can help them.”

LAURA BURGE, STUDENT EXPERIENCE MANAGER,

FIND OUT MORE

Contact Laura Burge,
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[Deakin Residential RESPECT values.](#)

[University Mental Health Framework.](#)

LINKS TO THE FRAMEWORK

Deakin Residential Services' student experience framework and RESPECT Values help to create a supportive university community that enhances student connectedness and facilitates participation in university life, improving the mental health and wellbeing of on-campus residents.



This aligns with **principle three** of the [University Mental Health Framework](#).

Programs and initiatives to support students' mental health and wellbeing typically involve a range of different practices. This case study also draws on other practices described in the framework by:

- recognising and addressing mental health and wellbeing risk factors and stressors associated with transitioning to and living on-campus;
- ensuring students are active in peer support roles, such as residential leaders. This allows them to share experiences, facilitate access to supports and increases connections within the university; and
- facilitating collaboration and communication between Campus Life staff and student services, which ensures expertise within the university is used to guide university responses and facilitate a consistent experience for students.

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