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"It has to be a partnership. Without having students at the table, your efforts can become tokenistic," says Aileen, who is a Mental Health Champion herself.

A collage of the word "REVOLUTION" in various shades of green and black, with some letters overlapping and a large, bold "R" at the bottom left.



Image: UQ

In 2019, the university had 85 student Mental Health Champions across many different schools and faculties, with a new cohort added annually to replace graduates.

All Mental Health Champions engage in an extensive training process that involves; mental health first aid training; joining the UQ Volunteer Program; completion of training modules on topics such as respectful relationships; and a final induction.

“The induction process lays down the ground rules, explains the responsibilities that come with the role and provides a good baseline understanding of what’s required and how to be of most help,” says Aileen.

Many students who are attracted to the role have lived experience of dealing with mental health concerns. Aileen views this as a positive but notes that it's crucial to provide students with clear instructions on how to share their personal story in an appropriate way.

"They are not psychologists or social workers. Their role is to make referrals, help destigmatise help-seeking, and increase awareness of mental health services within the student community," says Aileen.

“It has to be a partnership. Without having students at the table, your efforts can become tokenistic.”

AILEEN ALEXANDER, SERVICE IMPROVEMENT MANAGER,
STUDENT SERVICES DIRECTORATE

WORKSHOPS BOOST WELLBEING

Recognising that students need further support to manage their mental wellbeing, online and in-person workshops have been designed to teach students self-care practices that can lead to improved mental wellbeing and academic performance.

Aileen reports that the workshops are so well-attended that most have waitlists. She explains that students are keen to learn techniques that will help them manage anxiety and depression.

“Our students suffer from anxiety and depression in the same way as any other group, but often their anxiety and worry goes beyond concern about life, academic stress and exams. We see many students that have increased anxiety about what’s happening around the world, economically and ecologically,” says Aileen.

Most workshops are run by staff with clinical backgrounds in psychology and social work who are also Mental Health Champions. Sessions cover everything from stress management, to art-based therapy for cultivating emotional resilience, and set students up for success by providing guidance on ways to cultivate healthy habits that support improved mental wellbeing.

SPOTLIGHT ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Aileen identifies international students as being at greater risk of developing mental health issues.

“For many international students, mental ill health is still seen as a weakness. Many are fearful that it will affect their ability to graduate or practice in their area of study, and some worry that seeking help will affect their visa in Australia,” says Aileen.

Originally from China, Mallory Mao currently works part-time within the UQ Student Services team while studying a Master of Social Work. She became a Mental Health Champion to help create a respectful, open space for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to talk about their mental health concerns.

“Leaving friends and family behind, learning a new language, and adapting to a new culture is stressful. So is juggling study and work commitments,” says Mallory, who adds that there’s still stigma surrounding mental health, especially within the Chinese community.

“In China, families have high expectations of their children. Mental health is not something we openly discuss within our culture, so it’s hard for international students to identify and discuss mental health issues.”

Both Aileen and Mallory believe that the diverse range of cultures represented within the network is one of its strengths.

"It's important for students to see themselves in other students so that they don't feel that their situation is something to be ashamed of. The greater the diversity, the greater the chance you'll see yourself in a champion," says Aileen.

Mental Health Champions are listed on the UQ website, with their photos, areas of study and contact details displayed. This makes it easy for students to find the right person to connect with.

"One of the beautiful things about this program is that I get to see so many different cultures working together to improve the human experience," reflects Aileen.

"It's a joy to be a part of."

"Leaving friends and family behind, learning a new language, and adapting to a new culture is stressful. So is juggling study and work commitments."

MALLORY MAO, UNIVERSITY STUDENT

FIND OUT MORE

[UQ Mental Health Strategy 2018-20.](#)

[UQ Mental Health Champions Network.](#)

[University Mental Health Framework.](#)

LINKS TO THE FRAMEWORK

The University of Queensland's Mental Health Champions Network empowers the university community to employ strategies that support early help-seeking and good mental health and wellbeing, and enables ongoing engagement with learning.



This aligns with **principle two** 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:

- cultivating leaders who prioritise mental health and wellbeing at UQ and embed it within the core business of the university;
- having mental health and wellbeing initiatives, such as the Mental Health Champions Network, which are co-designed with students, including those students with a lived experience of mental ill-health; and
- ensuring diverse student cultures and identities are valued and visible across the university community.

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