

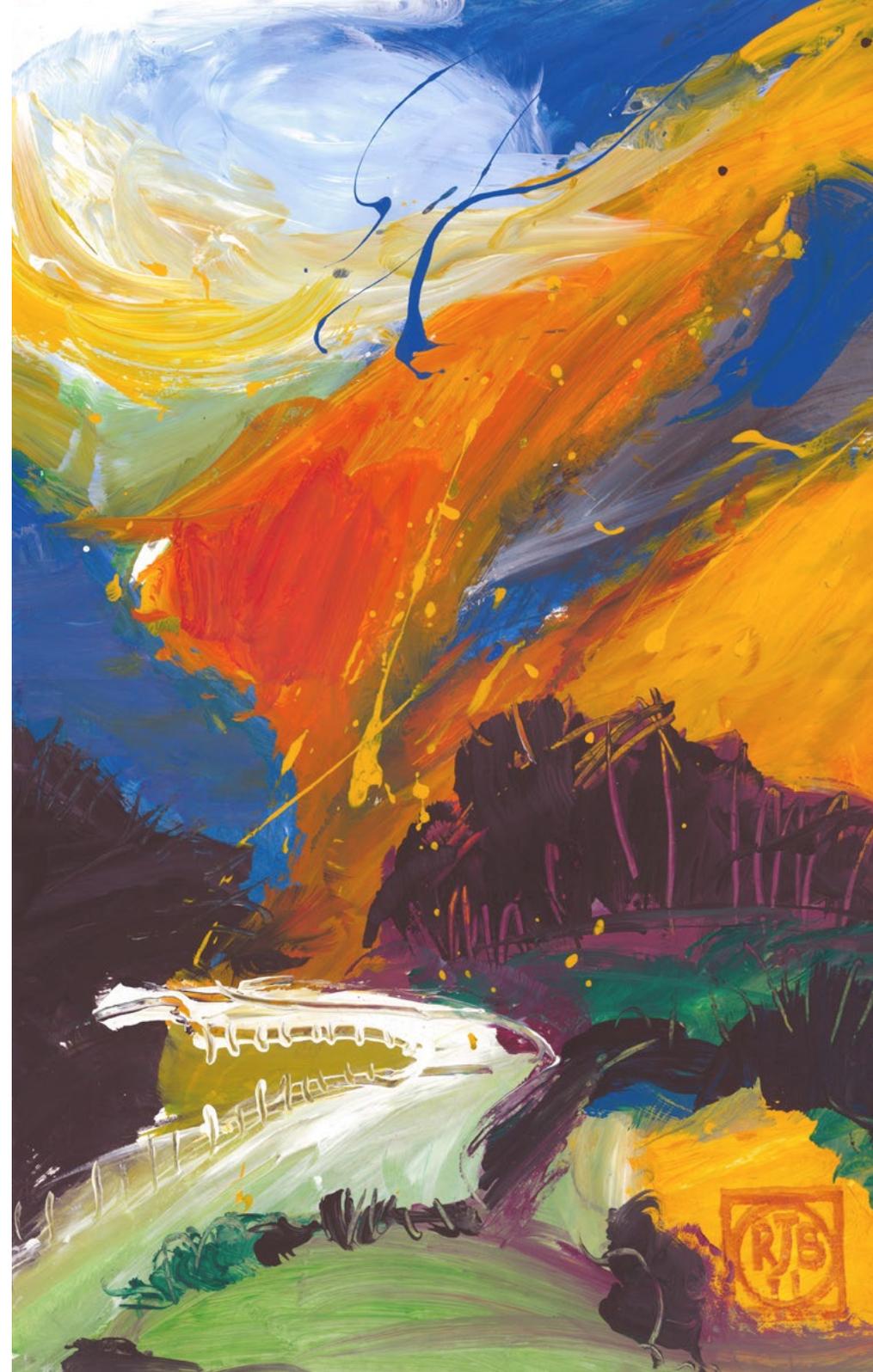


# The Visual Arts Wellbeing Project

A Wellbeing Needs Assessment of Visual Art Students in Australian Universities.

A Doctor of Philosophy Thesis by Eileen Siddins  
Bachelor of New Media Arts (Hons Class I)  
College of Arts, Society and Education  
James Cook University, Townsville

Submitted 23 February 2021





## COVER IMAGE: LIGHT FLOW BY ROBERT JOHN BURTON

Robert John Burton is an established Queensland artist who identifies as an Aspie, otherwise described as a person with Asperger's Syndrome or ASD. Robert's work depicts emotional reflection, self-discovery, and self-expression that requires no standard technique or demand. Robert is currently seeking support to restart his art career after the Townsville floods in 2019. You can find more information about Robert's work by visiting #artfulaspie on YouTube.

### SUPERVISOR TEAM

Primary Supervisor: Professor Ryan Daniel  
Secondary Supervisor: Professor Margaret-Anne Carter  
External Supervisor: Doctor Beryl Buckby

### WORD COUNT

Front of book: 5,405 words  
Chapter 1 to Chapter 8: 70,138 words  
References: 14,298 words  
Appendices: 14,725 words

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Siddins, E. (2021). *The Visual Arts Wellbeing Project: A Wellbeing Needs Assessment of Visual Art Students in Australian Universities*, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia.

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# ABSTRACT

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In response to global concerns about university students' mental health, various whole-of-institution strategies have been developed to enhance students' resilience and wellbeing. These strategies are essential for students who have experienced national and international challenges to their wellbeing, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these approaches do not always consider the unique challenges that undergraduate students from specific study areas experience, nor the unique strengths they can adapt to mitigate these challenges. To contribute original knowledge to the growing evidence-based approaches that promote student mental health, this research explored the wellbeing of an undergraduate student group that has not yet been comprehensively researched for this purpose: visual art students in Australian universities. Additionally, this research sought to understand visual art students' opinions on how to foster student resilience and wellbeing while they are enrolled in Australian art courses.

The purpose of this research was to develop a wellbeing needs assessment of visual art students in Australian higher education. Given university students are the primary stewards of their health, this research prioritised the voices of visual art university students regarding their wellbeing. This was achieved by exploring the students' descriptions of their wellbeing in educational contexts, their opinions on how university experiences can impact mental health, and their recommendations for how art education can be improved to enhance and sustain their wellbeing. The findings illustrated participants' lower levels of wellbeing and a rich representation of students' opinions on how their university experience influenced their wellbeing. Needs assessments can help art academics better understand how innovative and sustainable strategies can be woven into the education and services that visual art students access. Thus, this research provides a foundation of evidence that can be used to design art curricula in Australian universities to better support visual art students' wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Visual art undergraduates, Australian creative curriculum, student mental health, student wellbeing, resilience theory, wellbeing theory.

# PREFACE

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I decided to begin a doctorate degree after a series of experiences as both an art student and educator. While completing a Bachelor of New Media Arts, I had conversations with other students who felt ill-equipped for work in the creative industries. This insecurity was something I had keenly felt as an undergraduate art student, too, and I noticed that many of my peers commonly referred to their stress levels and mental health difficulties. The topic of supporting art students' mental health increasingly became important for me as I graduated from my degree and worked as a sessional lecturer and tutor. As a sessional educator, I experienced private conversations with students who disclosed their mental health difficulties. Their unique ways of seeking help, and my interest in academia and the field of mental health, led to my pursuit of expanding knowledge in the area of art students' wellbeing.

Although this research began in 2018, the thesis was still being written when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Given mental health difficulties

have increased during the pandemic (Fisher et al., 2020; Van Rheenen et al., 2020), I believe that the research recommendations presented in this thesis are more relevant than ever. Creative art students, educators, and practitioners will continue to experience both wellbeing benefits and challenges because of the pandemic, as literature has already highlighted (ArtsHub, 2020; Design Business Council et al., 2020; LIP, 2020). Much has changed for Australian art students and artists alike, but this has not negated my views of visual art students as valuable contributors to higher education. In doing so, I have adopted a transformative social justice framework and considered the role neoliberalism can play to accompany authentic change within the university sector (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019).

This research and my conduct as a research candidate is fundamentally shaped by my personal perspective. While being mindful that all research is conducted with underlying subjective and objective qualities (Yin, 2016), I chose to maintain reflexivity throughout this

research (Sparkes, 2001). Given reflexive practice is considered the 'gold standard' for ensuring the trustworthiness of research findings, I used reflexivity to deepen my understanding and increase the credibility of my research (Dodgson, 2019). Consequently, this thesis begins with me first aspiring towards some semblance of transparency by detailing certain aspects of my disposition, for readers to consider how it affects the content that they are reading. I henceforth declare that my research is influenced by my beliefs and position as a white, middle-class woman and young adult. I have experience as an artist and university teacher, I identify as a past and present student (de Bie, 2020), and I am privileged to share strong and supportive relationships with my family and friends.

My immediate family—including my husband and parents—have all maintained an open care and desire to understand each other's mental health. This has included the understanding of our different social and religious experiences. I was raised by parents who maintain Christian

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convictions. Similarly, my own Christian beliefs have been maintained and frequently sustain my goals to value each individual, and to respect and advocate their importance regardless of their philosophical and theological position. I believe that this is reflected in my relationship with my husband, who is not Christian, and some of my friends who express a dislike of the Christian faith. It is through my goals that I have grown more aware of the mental health needs of the creative community who I frequently interact with.

As a researcher, I have not abandoned my faith. Indeed, I have noticed that my Christian beliefs share many similarities with the science of positive psychology (Kern & Benecchi, 2019). My stance—and coincidentally, the stance of other scholars—is that a balanced perspective on positive aspects such as grace, compassion, hope, and love aligns with both the fundamental principles of God and research frameworks like wellbeing theory (Kern & Benecchi, 2019). I believe that both science and faith can benefit one another, given they share common goals

of humanity flourishing (Charry & Kosits, 2017). Consequently, my perspectives as a Christian woman have led to my research position as an advocate for Australian art students and their mental health. This stance will ultimately influence the way I have researched the views of those in the Australian creative and higher education community, and I have thus taken steps to critically inspect my research processes ([Section 4.2.1](#)). I invite you, the reader, to maintain an awareness of my research stance as you begin to read this thesis.

# THESIS FEATURES

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To encourage active involvement with the research, this thesis has been designed with additional features. These features are listed below.

1. Readers can navigate this interactive PDF document by clicking on in-text links. All active in-text links will be formatted in blue with an underline (e.g., [clicking on this link will take readers to the Abstract](#)). A [TABLE OF CONTENTS](#) button is also available in the footer, on the bottom right-hand corner of each page. Clicking on this text will help readers navigate to the Table of Contents.
2. To reduce cognitive load and increase flow, in-text citations consisting of more than three references are placed in the footnotes.
3. Details regarding certain aspects of the research process are located in the Appendices and will be referenced in the main narrative when applicable.
4. Not all key terms are defined in the main narrative of this thesis. Instead, these key terms are available in the [List of Definitions](#). Some of these definitions detail theoretical frameworks relevant to the research conducted (e.g., resilience and wellbeing theory).

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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First and foremost, I acknowledge my supervisors Professor Ryan Daniel, Professor Margaret Anne Carter, and Doctor Beryl Buckby. Thank you for the countless times you have supported, inspired, and selflessly shared your knowledge with me. It has truly been a joy and a privilege to have worked with you on this research.

I am sincerely grateful for the help of the library, administrative, and technical staff. Your continued support has enriched my experience with this research and helped me produce a thesis I am proud of. Additionally, my work on this thesis has benefitted greatly from the help of various artists, art organisations, and academics who shared this research within their networks. Thank you for your enthusiasm; it was a great encouragement for me and confirmed the value of this research.

To the artists who contributed to this research by developing the promotional videos, logo, and graphics for the research website: thank you. I

would not have been able to share my message so effectively without your efforts.

I also extend a special thank you to all the art students who showed an interest in or participated in the research. These students demonstrated an openness, passion, and courage that continues to inspire and teach me. Their generosity is integral to the outcomes of this research and I am indebted to them for their willingness to share in moments of vulnerability, resilience, failure, and achievement.

To my husband Ross, my family, and friends: thank you for the times when you cared for me and my research. You have helped me define and redefine my sense of purpose as a research candidate countless times over the past few years. I am eternally grateful to you, and God, for your faith in me and your companionship through this journey.

# RESEARCH STATEMENT

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## STATEMENT OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

I acknowledge the support of my supervisor team, Professor Ryan Daniel, Professor Margaret-Anne Carter, and Doctor Beryl Buckby, who provided timely and consistent feedback that contributed to the outcomes of my research. Their assistance improved how I conducted myself as a researcher during the planning and execution of this research, and directly impacted the development of this thesis.

Additionally, I acknowledge the financial support provided by the Commonwealth of Australia through the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship at James Cook University. This contribution supported local artists who created promotional material for the research. It also enabled further professional development and networking by funding workshops and travel to research conferences.

The research was conducted in compliance with the National Health and Medical Research

Council guidelines and procedures outlined in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). Ethics clearance for this research was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee at James Cook University (approval number H7358, see [Appendix 4](#)).

## STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that this research is mine alone, bar the contributions already acknowledged. The research in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for any other academic award at James Cook University or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: 

Date: 23 February 2021

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# LIST OF DEFINITIONS

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**Administrative Staff:** For this research, administrative staff (or administrators) are described as professional and academic staff who are responsible for administrative tasks that impact students' education. These staff maintain and supervise their institution and department. Some administrative staff are senior staff who share joint responsibilities as teachers, researchers, and coordinators.

**Analysis Stage:** There are different stages outlined in this thesis. To clarify, the words 'analysis stage' are used to describe the different stages in the analysis of data ([Section 4.4](#)).

**Artists, Art Students, and Art Graduates:** In this thesis, the noun 'art' is written as singular or plural depending on the context of each sentence. Art students are defined as creative students who are studying in literary, visual, or performing art areas. This research focusses on students completing undergraduate university degrees and the word 'student' specifically relates to undergraduate students unless otherwise

specified. Additionally, this research discusses students who have graduated from their creative degrees. In this case, the words 'graduate' and 'undergraduate' are used interchangeably. The words 'art practitioner,' however, are used to identify artists who have been working as professionals. To better determine who art practitioners are compared to art graduates or students, this research adopts Throsby and Petetskaya's (2017) definition of art professionals. Thus, art practitioners are not identified by their income generation or professional training, but by their track record in producing and showing or publishing work that reaches a professional standard according to that artform. This includes art practitioners who are working part time or full time. Art students, graduates, and practitioners are referred to as artists in this research.

**Curriculum:** To define curriculum, curricular, and curricula, this research refers to Baik and colleagues (2017), who identify curriculum as what is taught and assessed, and how it is taught and assessed.

**Creative Industries:** The creative industries is a term and concept that is subject to various definitions (Daniel, 2017b). As a standard definition, the creative activities refer to industries that demonstrate creativity, skill, and talent to generate wealth and employment by producing creative and intellectual property (United Kingdom Department of Culture Media and Sport, 2001). On par with leaders of Australian creative organisations (Daniel, 2017b), middle Australians (Fielding & Trembath, 2020c), and the participants in this research, the terms 'creative industries,' 'creative workforce,' 'the arts and culture sector,' and 'the arts' are used in this thesis, and sometimes used interchangeably. This is done with understanding that the arts typically refer to literary, performing, and visual art disciplines, whereas the creative industries include the arts and a diversity of other disciplines such as film, advertising, publishing, and architecture (Bridgstock, 2013).

**Department:** In this research, the word 'department' has been used to classify university

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faculty that teach principal subject matter relating to a broad field of education (BFOE). This includes any faculty, sectors, fields, colleges, or campuses that educate students. The primary BFOE relevant to this research is the Creative Arts (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). In this context, the term ‘art department’ is used.

**Gatekeepers:** This term refers to people or institutions that act as an intermediary between the research and what they want to research. For this research, the gatekeepers included visual art teachers and administrators in Australian universities, Australian visual art institutions, and Australian artists.

**Help Seeking:** This research defines help-seeking behaviours as a person’s active process of seeking help and using resources to cope with wellbeing difficulties.

**Higher Education:** Higher education in Australia is defined as education that can be acquired after secondary education, if

the prospective student has had sufficient academic preparation and is proficient in the English language (Norton et al., 2018). This education has two main providers: universities that offer graduate and postgraduate qualifications, and non-university providers—including institutions like TAFE—that offer diploma qualifications (Orygen, 2017). For the purpose of this research, references to higher education primarily focus on Australian universities (Norton et al., 2018). The word ‘higher’ will be used interchangeably with ‘tertiary’ and ‘university’ education in this thesis.

**Imposter Phenomenon:** Imposter phenomenon involves a person’s difficulty recognising their abilities or accomplishments, due to their perceived inauthenticity, fraudulence, or lack of competence (Lee et al., 2020). This difficulty is often experienced by an individual regardless of contrary evidence identifying their competence.

**Mad Art:** This art practice is framed by an area of scholarship called mad studies (Reid et al.,

2019). Mad studies represent those who identify as mad including those with lived experiences as psychiatric survivors and those who identify as neurodiverse, disabled, or mentally ill (de Bie, 2020; McWade et al., 2015). Mad art is created by and about mad people to focus on topics of access and inclusion.

**Mature-age Students:** In this research, mature aged students are defined as students who are 25 years or older (Coelli et al., 2012). This definition helps readers compare students who have recently left high school with those who are older in the cohort.

**Mental Health:** For the purpose of this research, mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing that plays an integral part in a person’s overall health (WHO, 2016). Like wellbeing, mental health is dynamic and situational; it depends on a balance of many different aspects of life experiences, including the person’s environmental conditions and resources on hand. Baik et al. (2017), describe a positive

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state of mental health as closely connected with wellbeing and more than the absence of mental health difficulties. This research refers to Ashfield and colleagues (2017, p. 18), who define good mental health as an agreeable functioning of a person's mental activity, emotions, behavioural responses and capacities. Poor mental health, however, is experienced when a person cannot function effectively in response to challenging life experiences.

As described by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), mental health is often linked with social problems including stigma, isolation, and discrimination (AIHW, 2018). To encourage meaningful community engagement relating to mental health support, this research discourages the presumption that disruptions to good mental health are always an 'illness' or 'disorder' but rather adopts mental health terminology that respectfully normalises and contextualises human distress (Ashfield et al., 2017). The terminology provided by Ashfield et al. (2017) situates mental health on a broad spectrum of human experience

including common mental health difficulties that are considered a normal—albeit difficult—part of a person's life experience. Hence, in this research, the words mental health 'difficulties' or 'compromised mental health' are used with consideration of how the intensity of the problem impacts a person's functioning on a day to day basis. When referring to other literature, different terms are occasionally used in this thesis.

**Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence:** At times, the research participants referred to these terms when describing themselves or other art students. This research refers to neurodiverity and neurodivergence as dynamic terms that relate to peoples' different cognitive functioning (Chapman, 2020; Gentle, 2018). These terms reflect an idea that removes stigma associated with disability and promotes diversity as normal (Chapman, 2020). Hence, this research presents the participants' views by acknowledging the value and creative strengths that neurodiverse people contribute to the creative workforce (Bielecki & Varvarides, 2019).

**Performing Arts:** Defining creative artists is difficult, given the definition of creativity is divergent and frequently changes (Clarke & Budge, 2010). For this research, most of the described art disciplines have been classified as performing and visual art disciplines. Performing art disciplines can include multidisciplinary art forms. Thus, performing artists can produce works that cross over various disciplines including—but not limited to—acting, dance, and music (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

**Positive Psychology:** Positive psychology can be defined as researching the conditions and processes that advance wellbeing in people (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Seligman played a significant role in revitalising research and the promotion of positive psychology (Scorsolini-Comin et al., 2013). According to Seligman and his colleagues, positive psychology is "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" (2005, p. 410).

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Instead of focussing on weaknesses, positive psychology can provide a study of a person's positive emotions and health (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009). This is not to suggest that negative aspects of psychology are unnecessary or unaddressed in positive psychology. Indeed, Cohn and Frederickson (2009) claim that negative emotions are just as important in helping people to respond to threats and avoid risks. Regardless of any 'benefits' of negative emotions, positive psychology deliberately focusses on understanding how to relieve suffering, and increase happiness through cultivation of character strengths (Seligman et al., 2005). For this reason, positive psychology techniques can also be used by people who are not experiencing mental ill-health, but are simply motivated to improve their wellbeing (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009).

**Research Strand:** A research strand is the component of mixed methods research that includes the process of conducting qualitative or quantitative research. As Creswell and Plano Clark explain (2011), these basic processes

include designing the research question(s), collecting and analysing the data, and interpreting the findings. There are two strands in this research: the Survey Strand and Interview Strand ([Section 3.5](#)).

**Resilience:** In this research, resilience is defined as a process by which people navigate the resources they have on hand to manage the challenges they experience. The original meaning of the word resilience is to bounce or spring back from challenges (Smith et al., 2013). Hence, resilience is often identified when a person experiences challenges—ranging from common daily difficulties to major life changes—with the primary consequence of the challenges leading the person to positive adaptation (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Van Breda, 2018). Resilience involves behaviour that can be taught to students (Stallman, 2011).

Like wellbeing, resilience is considered as multifaceted and dynamic (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011; Walker et al., 2006). While acknowledging

different theories relevant to resilience,<sup>[1]</sup> this research conceptualises resilience as the way that challenges are appraised by people, the way they respond to and cope with challenges, and the positive outcomes that occur as a consequence to their experience. Such processes are situational and can depend on an individual's social and cultural meaning (Ungar, 2006, 2011). For this research, resilience was primarily examined within educational contexts. In higher education, the word resilience is recognised as a “bridge between education and mental health promotion” (Orygen, 2017, p. 34) that can help students respond better to academic challenges.

**Support Services:** In this research, support services include professional education, legal, employment, and healthcare services that

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1. For more information about recovery theory see Fletcher and Sarkar (2013), for grit theory see Duckworth et al. (2007), and for coping theory see Skinner et al. (2003). A list of additional resources can also be found in [Appendix 6](#).

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promote, aid, improve, sustain, or restore the wellbeing of people. These services can be located on university campuses or external to universities. Although the support services can include a range of assistance, the research participants more commonly referred to services from the mental health sector. As described by Orygen (2020a), the mental health sector includes—but is not limited to—mental health organisations, peer workforces, general practitioners, and allied health professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, social workers, mental health nurses and occupational therapists.

**Teachers:** Although often referred to as tutors or lecturers by the research participants, this research uses the word 'teachers' to describe any sessional or permanent university staff who are directly involved in educating and assessing students. Such teaching staff can also include academic educators who share joint responsibilities. For example, academics who teach but their primary activity includes research administration and supervision of their department.

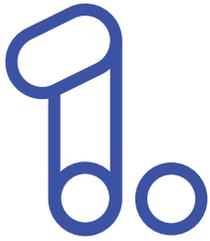
### **Transgressive and Therapeutic Teaching**

**Models:** This research refers to Hjelde's (2020) description of two main ideals that form predominant teaching models in visual art curricula. These ideals are transgressive and therapeutic. Transgressive teaching models position students as artists who express modernist and avant-garde ideas with 'radical individuation'. Therapeutic teaching models frame student learning in a way that reaches consensus with political and social agendas to benefit society (Hjelde, 2020).

**Visual Arts:** For this research, visual art disciplines are defined as creative art forms that are primarily visual in nature, including design. Like performing art disciplines, visual art disciplines can include multidisciplinary art forms. Visual artists can create works related to disciplines including graphic design, painting, craft, fashion design and digital art (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

**Vulnerability:** Although resilience and vulnerability are not antonyms of each other, this research uses the word vulnerability for heuristic purposes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) to describe different aspects of resilience on a continuous scale, rather than as a static dichotomy. Both resilience and vulnerability coexist in everyone (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) and people can respond to vulnerability in different ways with different outcomes (Van Breda, 2018).

**Wellbeing:** Given the central role of wellbeing in this research, a detailed description is outlined in the literature review ([Section 2.2](#)).



# INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1: RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

Like other tertiary students in Australia, art students are faced with a unique set of challenges during their education (Baik et al., 2019). Many of the challenges that art students experience are linked not only with their immediate university education, but the oft-precarious creative industries that are fraught with unemployment, financial difficulties, competition, isolation, and arguably harmful social preconceptions (Siddins, 2018). Research identifies students from various art disciplines—including design, writing, or illustration—as experiencing higher levels of mental health difficulties than other students (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009; Lipson et al., 2016). However, current research has frequently addressed ways to support the wellbeing of students studying performing arts including dance, acting, and music (Maxwell et al., 2015; Moyle, 2019).

Essentially, there is limited research literature that focusses on enhancing the wellbeing of art students who do not study performing arts

(Section 2.4.4). To address this gap in literature, this doctorate research contributes original knowledge by championing students' wellbeing in tertiary visual art education. This research also prioritises visual art students' opinions on how to foster and support their wellbeing in Australian higher art education, to understand the full reality of these students' wellbeing needs in educational contexts (Baik et al., 2019; Carlson et al., 2020). Hence, this research represents the student voice as evidence to support effective transformation and increase students' awareness of their own agency within their educational community (Bovill et al., 2011; Healey et al., 2016).

## 1.2: RESEARCH PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this research was to develop a wellbeing needs assessment of visual art students in Australian higher education. This needs assessment provided a descriptive profile of the students' resilience, mental health, and wellbeing by using a parallel mixed methods

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approach. Given the descriptive purpose of this research, the participating visual art students were not intentionally identified with compromised mental health. Instead, an in-depth understanding of students' wellbeing needs was acquired by mixing qualitative (interview) and quantitative (survey) data to answer the overarching research question:

**How can visual art students' current wellbeing be improved and sustained during their higher education?**

This research provides an evidence base that describes visual art students' wellbeing needs within higher education contexts. Additionally, the research provides recommendations that are founded on these students' wellbeing needs, to inform future directions for educational reform. Expanding knowledge in this area through a needs assessment and research recommendations can help guide future practical directions for wellbeing intervention within visual art students' degrees. To direct this research, two research objectives were thus outlined:

1. **describe** the current mental health, resilience, and wellbeing of Australian visual art students in higher education, and
2. **explore** ways to improve and sustain Australian visual art students' wellbeing through their higher education.

**1.3: ORGANISATION OF THESIS**

This thesis is organised to follow the process of the research conducted. [Chapter 2](#) delivers background information about the research by reviewing extant literature focussed on the wellbeing of Australian university students, the experience of visual artists during their undergraduate education, and their experience after graduation. This chapter identifies a gap in knowledge regarding Australian research that cohesively addresses the wellbeing of visual art students, and concludes by outlining the significance of this current research. [Chapter 3](#) provides a rationale for the chosen mixed methods approach, the transformative paradigm, and theoretical lenses that framed the research.

This chapter outlines the methods used to recruit and gather data from the research participants.

In [Chapter 4](#), the researcher's reflexive practices and approach to the analysis, merging, and interpretation of the mixed data is described. The consequent research findings are presented in two separate chapters: [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#). In these chapters, both quantitative and qualitative results are displayed through a theme-by-theme approach (Fetters et al., 2013) to adhere to the qualitative priority and descriptive language detailed in the research objectives. [Chapter 5](#) and [Section 6.1](#) to [Section 6.3](#) thus present the mixed findings that **describe** how the visual art students' university experiences influenced their wellbeing. Subsequently, the remaining results reported in [Chapter 6 \(Section 6.4\)](#) present mixed findings that **explore** participants' perspectives on how to enhance the wellbeing of visual art students during their higher education.

A discussion of the mixed findings and research recommendations are presented in

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[Chapter 7](#). This chapter prioritises the research recommendations, that were shaped by the mixed findings and supported by references to research literature. The purpose of these recommendations aligned with the overarching research question by identifying positive areas of transformation in higher visual art education, to improve and sustain participants' wellbeing. In [Chapter 8](#), the thesis concludes with an explanation of how the research question and objectives were achieved. This final chapter acknowledges the significance and limitations of the research and calls for future research to inform educational reform and benefit art students' wellbeing.



# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## 2.1: SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The prevalence of wellbeing and mental health difficulties in Australian youth and adults is frequently highlighted in the research literature ([Section 2.2](#)). To address these issues, research literature has called for early and evidence-based intervention (Productivity Commission, 2020). Given significant research, teaching, and mental health expertise exists within Australian universities, these institutions are well positioned to collaborate with mental health communities in settings-based research and support for students (Orygen, 2020). These universities are also well-positioned to develop a wellbeing profile of undergraduate students from different study areas, to assist the development of strategies that meet their unique wellbeing needs (Baik et al., 2019; Larcombe et al., 2016). Although there is a growing body of empirical evidence confirming the severity and prevalence of Australian university students' wellbeing difficulties, research that coherently examines student wellbeing and stratifies the findings into study

areas is limited ([Section 2.4.4](#)). Research that profiles the wellbeing needs of visual art students is also limited.

This chapter outlines extant research literature to describe the Australian university environment that many visual art students experience. The review begins by first establishing a description of wellbeing and the continued concern for students' mental health in Australian university contexts ([Section 2.2](#)). Next, the review outlines educational interventions that foster and sustain students' wellbeing during their study ([Section 2.3](#)), and factors that can influence visual art students' wellbeing during their undergraduate degree ([Section 2.4](#)). To further understand tertiary visual art students' wellbeing, this section reviews research literature regarding the challenges art students need to prepare for when they seek entry into the workforce. Finally, the review addresses research that specifically measures the wellbeing of art students, before outlining the need for further research in the area ([Section 2.5](#)).

## 2.2: WELLBEING AND AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' WELLBEING

Health is recognised as more than the absence of disease or infirmity, but rather a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing (WHO, 2016). This research prioritises the term wellbeing and adopts a definition provided by Dodge and colleagues (2012). Dodge et al. define wellbeing as a multifaceted state represented as a seesaw (Figure 2.1). This seesaw visualises how people seek a state of homeostasis between the challenges they experience and resources they can access.

**Figure 2.1**

*Wellbeing as Defined by Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230*



Wellbeing as defined by Dodge et al. (2012) is linked with the definition of [mental health](#)

and [resilience](#) used in this research. Mental health, like wellbeing, is impacted by the challenges and resources visualised in [Figure 2.1](#). Resilience determines how people respond to challenges by using resources to achieve a state of wellbeing, thus encapsulating the resources visualised on the seesaw (Schultze-Lutter, Schimmelman, & Schmidt, 2016). Mental health is described as a state of wellbeing (WHO, 2014, 2016) and resilience is considered an additional feature of wellbeing (Coffey et al., 2016; Huppert & So, 2013).

For this research, wellbeing is considered a spectrum that is anchored by a positive state of thriving or flourishing, and a negative state of languishing. While acknowledging the different eudaimonic, hedonic, subjective, and objective wellbeing theories mentioned in literature,<sup>[2]</sup> this research primarily applies the wellbeing theory described by Seligman

(2011). Five wellbeing dimensions (PERMA) are identified in this theory: 1) positive emotion, 2) engagement, 3) relationships, 4) meaning, and 5) achievement. Further information about the conceptual and operational capabilities of wellbeing theory is detailed in [Section 3.3](#).

The definition visualised by [Figure 2.1](#) above can be used within Australian educational contexts. In higher education, the students' homeostasis which is visualised as wellbeing in the centre of the seesaw, can be influenced by various challenges and resources ranging from academic under-preparedness and physical injury, to academic competence and a sense of belonging (Baik et al., 2017). Any dips in resources or challenges can impact students' wellbeing. Depending on how the student is contextually situated, too few challenges—just as much as too many challenges—can have a negative effect on their wellbeing, given the student might experience stagnation if they choose not to seek more challenges (Dodge et al., 2012).

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2. For more information, see Diener et al. (2017), Forgeard et al. (2011), Ryff (2014), Thieme et al. (2015), and Thomas (2009).

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Scholarly literature consistently highlights wellbeing difficulties as a key issue in Australia (Carter et al, 2017). Mental health has been formally recognised by the Department of Health (2011) as one of eight national health priority areas in Australia with mental and substance abuse identified as the fourth leading burden of disease in 2015 (AIHW, 2019). Although this burden is lower than results from 2003, mental health difficulties prevail, predominantly effecting Australians between the age of 15 and 44—with suicide and anxiety disorders most impacting males and females respectively (AIHW, 2019). Mental health difficulties cost the Australian economy up to \$70 billion per year (Productivity Commission, 2020), with government investment in mental health rapidly increasing but still sitting well below the estimated cost burden (Mental Health Australia & KPMG, 2018).

In Australia, there has been a recent call for mental health systems to focus on prevention and early intervention (Productivity Commission, 2020). To better support Australians with mental

health difficulties—specifically before mental health difficulties reduce their quality of life—the Productivity Commission (2020) submitted a Mental Health report to the Australian government in mid-2020. This report provided recommendations for short to long-term reform to reduce the need for clinical intervention, improve peoples’ experiences with the healthcare system, and encourage continued engagement with education and work. A key recommendation in this report was early, proactive, and reactive intervention—for children, youth, and also for adults in higher education and the workplace.

In Australian university contexts, many undergraduate students are at the peak age (16 to 24) of onset for mental health difficulties (Orygen, 2017; Veness, 2016). Mental health difficulties predominantly burden adolescents and adults in Australia (AIHW, 2019), and a majority of the Australian university student cohort are in their late teens or early twenties. Many students are subsequently at an age where mental health difficulties can manifest (Carter

et al., 2017). This is relevant according to 2019 data, given 77% of the students enrolled in higher education were part of the 16 to 24 age group (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Research has also indicated that students experience more moderate psychological distress than those in the general population (Browne et al., 2017; Cvetkovski et al., 2012; Stallman, 2010).

There are many factors that contribute to elevated levels of mental health difficulties in Australian university students. Given a majority of these students are young adults (Department of Education and Training, 2019), many are in a developmental stage where they can experience greater independence and increased responsibility as they construct their personal and professional identity (Andrews & Chong, 2011; Stokes & Wyn, 2007; White, 2007). This transition often requires more self-management as students juggle complex education, work, and family commitments (Orygen, 2017; Rickwood et al., 2017). As a result, younger students often navigate challenges including higher

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performance expectations, time limitations, separation from previous support networks and loneliness, job insecurity, poor diet and substance abuse, lack of sleep, and poor health due to sedentary behaviour (Carter et al., 2017; Landstedt et al., 2016).

Financial hardship is an additional challenge that Australian university students experience (Universities Australia, 2018). Despite reports of slight improvement in monetary circumstances, many university students have experienced financial challenges (Universities Australia, 2018). Research literature indicates that financial stress increases students' risk of increased psychological distress (Larcombe et al., 2016; Larcombe et al., 2021; Stallman, 2010). Furthermore, students often mitigate financial strain by managing paid work along with their study commitments, thus increasing the risk of adversely impacting their university performance (Universities Australia, 2018). To benefit student wellbeing, literature has called for more accessibility to financial aid, particularly

for student groups including indigenous, international, low socioeconomic status, and regional undergraduate students (Larcombe et al., 2021; Universities Australia, 2018).

Academic pressures can take their toll on university students. In one Australian study, (Rickwood et al., 2017) 64% of students in the 16-25 age group ( $n=2637$ ) and 55% of mature aged students ( $n=652$ ) indicated that they experienced academic stress in response to university activities. For these students, exams, presentations, and group assessment were the most stressful activities, with lectures and tutorials being the least stressful (Rickwood et al., 2017). With this in mind, it is not surprising that the levels of stress students experience tend to increase in the latter weeks of the teaching period, when their assessment is often due (Andrews & Chong, 2011).

Despite the stressful challenges that university students contend with, they can be reluctant to seek help (Hawkins et al., 2017). Some

students feel embarrassed or worried about stigma and discrimination from university staff, employers, and social groups if they disclose their mental health difficulties (McAuliffe et al., 2012; Rickwood et al., 2017). This self or public stigma can prevent students from seeking help unless they are confident that the response to their disclosure will be respectful, understanding, and supportive (Martin, 2010). It is possible that students cannot gauge if the seriousness of their mental health difficulties requires support, and some students prefer to cope by themselves (Productivity Commission, 2020; Rickwood et al., 2017). Additional help-seeking barriers include travel time, limited finances, and reduced access to resources they need to seek support (Andrews, 2019; Wynaden et al., 2013).

Low levels of resilience can inhibit student wellbeing and academic performance (Orygen, 2017; Stallman, 2011). Norton and Brett (2011) argue that while students may negatively react to academic stress, it can lead to personal and academic growth by helping them develop skills

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in cognitive and behavioural coping. However, without understanding how coping strategies—and resilience—can be developed, students may be ill-equipped to manage their stressful experience (Stallman, 2011). This is pertinent for students whose development of resilience has been restricted by overprotective parenting styles (Pedersen, 2017; Schiffrin et al., 2019). Regardless of their previous development opportunities, the research outlining academic stress in relation to student retention and performance (Kilpatrick et al., 2017; QILT, 2019a) has confirmed that resilience can play an important role in the student's university experience.

Another contributor to university students' wellbeing is their relationship with university staff, including their teachers (Baik et al., 2019). Teachers and administrative staff are well-positioned to connect students with support services, but they can feel ill equipped to appropriately manage conversations with students who are seeking help (Gulliver et al., 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2012). Mismanaged

responses to student disclosure can be a barrier for students to receive the support they need (AMSA, 2013; Productivity Commission, 2020). Thus, further clarity and training for teachers to respond to students' help-seeking—and fundamentally, to better support their students' wellbeing—has been a requested change for the higher education standards enforced by the Australian Government (Productivity Commission, 2020).

The challenges that teachers experience within their university environment can also impact their interactions with students (Baik et al., 2017). Key challenges that Australian academics experience include the deterioration of working conditions (Kenny, 2017). In response to limited funding support from the Australian Government, Australian universities continue to restructure or cancel degrees and reduce staff numbers (Murgatroyd, 2020; Tjia et al., 2020; Universities Australia, 2019). Consequently, university staff manage challenges including increased casualisation and job insecurity,

extended teaching periods, escalated student-staff ratios and student heterogeneity, intensified workloads, and course or productivity reviews (Baik et al., 2017; Cannizzo et al., 2019; Freudenberg & Samarkovski, 2014). Under these 'performativity' circumstances, students can feel like they are not always valued by staff as academic members who are engaged in education, but as economic units that contribute revenue to an impersonal, demand-driven business.<sup>[3]</sup>

In response to the increase in student wellbeing difficulties, internal professional [support services](#) in Australian universities have also increased. All Australian universities provide access to varying levels of mental health support (Productivity Commission, 2020) that range from online to in-person support (Andrews, 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2012). Australian university support services have also increased at a faster rate than any other

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3. For more information, see Ball (2003), Freudenberg and Samarkovski (2014), Matthews et al. (2019), Rochford (2014), and White (2007).

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university staff body in Australia (Norton et al., 2018; Vivekananda et al., 2011). However, many counselling services have not received additional funding and do not always have the resources to respond to the increasingly diverse, severe, and complex mental health needs of their growing student cohorts (Andrews & Chong, 2011; Clark et al., 2019). While considering the previously discussed student help-seeking barriers, and research that questions the efficacy of mental health treatment for young people (Davey et al., 2014), further research and partnerships with the mental health sector and university community is required to understand the reach and effectiveness of student support services (Orygen, 2017, 2020a).

Although universities meet current wellbeing and safety standards, there is still much to be done to support students' mental health (Productivity Commission, 2020; Veness, 2016). Australia has been described as falling behind internationally with regards to cohesive mental health policy and funding to develop and monitor

the progress of wellbeing interventions (Carter et al., 2017; Orygen, 2017; Veness, 2016). This is despite significant advances in support services and community recognition of mental health difficulties (Norton et al., 2018; Norton & Brett, 2011). Such delayed development of coherent policy could be due to stigma and "the incitement of vulnerability" from key decision makers (Wright, 2014, p. 149). There is also limited awareness and consistent research on how to navigate such social and educational complexities while balancing traditional teaching structures and wellbeing models to achieve academic outcomes (Reavley et al., 2013; Wright, 2014).

In response to calls for cohesive mental health policy and strategies to assist students (Orygen, 2017; Veness, 2016), various frameworks have been developed. For example, Baik and colleagues (2016) identified whole-of-university priority approaches to assist Australian universities. Recently, the Australian Government funded Orygen's development of the National University Mental Health Framework (Orygen,

2020a). This framework focussed on improving the promotion of and access to interventions and support services, improving the evidence base of students' mental health, and reducing student attrition (Carlson et al., 2020; Orygen, 2020a). In addition to this response, the Productivity Commission (2020, p. 283) recommended that the Australian Government further amend standard frameworks to ensure the regulation of university wellbeing strategies, including early intervention strategies that are monitored by university quality standard groups. Examples of these strategies will be explored next.

### **2.3: WAYS TO ENHANCE WELLBEING IN UNIVERSITY SETTINGS**

Wellbeing interventions have been used in schools, workplaces, and online communities to foster resilience and prevent mental health difficulties (Ryff, 2014; Thorn et al., 2020). In Australia, continued academic discussion addresses different recommendations and challenges for enhancing wellbeing in universities (Fernandez et al., 2016; Norton

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& Brett, 2011). For example, the Australasian Mental Health in Higher Education Conference (AMHHEC)<sup>[4]</sup> and two International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change (IJICC) special editions provided a space for researchers, teachers, students, and members of the healthcare and university community to explore mental health interventions (Carter, 2018; Carter et al., 2017). These conversations, and other research literature, focus on topics including online intervention, promotion of support services, and the integration of wellbeing topics in the curriculum to assist students—including those who do not seek help (Kampel et al., 2017; Schreiner et al., 2009).

The research literature promotes strategies to enhance students' wellbeing at university without compromising their academic achievement (Baik et al., 2017). These strategies can relate to positive psychology or positive education, described as an evidence-based

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4. For more information about AMHHEC, visit [www.jcu.edu.au/amhhec](http://www.jcu.edu.au/amhhec)

approach to learning by using interventions that increase student happiness, resilience, and creative thinking abilities (Seligman et al., 2009; White, 2016). Positive education interventions can be applied, and the outcomes measured, using the wellbeing theory framework (Kern et al., 2015). Such interventions have been used in primary, secondary, and higher education and include activities where students identify character strengths and positive events, practise kind acts, and express gratitude (Lambert et al., 2018; Marks & Wade, 2015; Seligman et al., 2009).

However, some research literature raises concerns regarding the rise of 'therapeutic culture' in education, as well as difficulties in delivering wellbeing interventions (Wright, 2014). Although there is limited empirical evidence to support what Wright (2014) describes as conservative and nostalgic laments for traditional authority, there is a risk that students can be mistaken as 'fragile participants' in an education that deviates from academic

scholarship to address self-development. Other important considerations include the extent of resources required to deliver interventions in educational settings (Norton & Brett, 2011; White, 2016) and limited research examining the positive and negative effects of wellbeing intervention (Burrows, 2017; Macedo et al., 2014; White & Kern, 2018). In response to these criticisms, research has grown more sophisticated in acknowledging the contextual nature of interventions (Kern et al., 2019).

One way that universities have supported the mental health of their students is through online intervention. In the wake of COVID-19, Australians have had more access to online mental health support, such as telehealth (Productivity Commission, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Evidence-based digital wellbeing services and online peer support programs could benefit university students, given these students frequently socialise and engage online, and can prefer to seek information about mental health using their electronic devices (Carter & Goldie,

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2017; Kampel et al., 2017). Online interventions such as Reach Out, The Desk, The Uni Virtual Clinic, and MoodGym<sup>[5]</sup> can promote social relationships and enable support in a caring, direct and frequent manner (Carter & Goldie, 2017; Thieme et al., 2015). These interventions also provide user-friendly, cost-effective, comfortable, and safe spaces that teaching and administrative staff can promote for students to anonymously seek help.<sup>[6]</sup>

It is vital that students experience educational environments and curricula that support their wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019). In response to this need for further wellbeing support, an emerging

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5. For more information about Reach Out, visit <https://au.reachout.com>. For more information about The Desk, visit [www.thedesk.org.au/about](http://www.thedesk.org.au/about). For more information about The Uni Virtual Clinic, visit <https://rsph.anu.edu.au/research/projects/uni-virtual-clinic>. For more information about MoodGym, visit <https://moodgym.com.au>.

6. For more information see (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Osborne et al., 2014; Papadatou-Pastou et al., 2015; Productivity Commission, 2020; Thorn et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2014).

body of literature now identifies research-based teaching in various study areas (Baik et al., 2017). These study areas include social work (Adamson et al., 2012), nursing (McAllister & McKinnon, 2009), medicine (Saravanan & Wilks, 2014), education (Knight et al., 2013; Stallman, 2010), law (Field et al., 2013; O'Brien, Tang, & Hall, 2011), and veterinary science (Fritschi et al., 2009; Hafen et al., 2006). However, there is an opportunity for further research in different study areas—such as the visual arts—to better inform the effectiveness of wellbeing interventions for university students (Baik et al., 2019; Fernandez et al., 2016).

A review of Australian scholarly literature identifies existing wellbeing support and educational intervention for some performing art students (Daniel & Johnstone, 2017). In addition to the Arts Wellbeing Collective ([Section 2.4.3](#)), the Australian Society for Performing Arts Healthcare (ASPAH)<sup>[7]</sup> promotes healthcare through a range

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7. For more information about ASPAH, visit [www.aspah.org.au](http://www.aspah.org.au).

of resources and events (Hadok, 2008). Some performing art students can also access the services of Australian performance psychologists who treat sports, dance, music, and singing practitioners (Moyle, 2019). Additional access to training and performance psychology is provided for these students through Australian performing art curricula designed to improve their wellbeing (Moyle, 2016, 2019; Osborne et al., 2014). For example, the Transitional Training Program (TTP) delivers a series of workshops that teach students about their wellbeing needs and ways to develop positive professional identities (Huddy, 2016).

However, there is limited Australian research literature that intentionally discusses evidence-based wellbeing interventions for visual art students in Australian universities. Although students have access to resources provided by Never Not Creative ([Section 2.4.3](#)), only two Australian visual art university subjects have been mentioned in research literature within the context of improving student mental health and

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wellbeing<sup>[8]</sup>. One subject, Interior Visualisation II (McAuliffe et al., 2015), was designed to support architecture, engineering, and design students who were overwhelmed by their transition into university (Baik et al., 2017). To do so, this subject delivered content to improve students' tacit skills, thinking processes, and constructive self-criticism (McAuliffe et al., 2015).

The second subject, Design Thinking for Social Innovation, used a co-experience approach to improve international students' experiences (Bhuva, 2018). Students in this subject were enrolled in different communication majors including design, business, and IT. To enhance student learning, this subject provided a discursive and safe space that was inclusive of students' learning styles and actively engaged students in various social media and face to face group discussion (Bhuva, 2018). One assessment in this subject required that student use design journals

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8. It is possible that other wellbeing-framed visual art subjects exist in Australian universities. However, these subjects are yet to receive attention in research literature.

to document their learning, thus encouraging reflection in a format that enabled their full creative freedom (Bhuva, 2018). This subject, and Interior Visualisation II, are admirable examples that currently stand alone in Australian wellbeing literature. Hence, there is potential to develop more evidence-based curricula to meet the wellbeing needs of visual art students.

## **2.4: TERTIARY ART STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND IMPACTS ON THEIR WELLBEING**

There is limited research that specifically addresses the wellbeing of visual art students in Australian universities ([Section 2.4.4](#)). However, a review of national and international literature outlining factors that describe creative art student, graduate, and practitioner experiences can provide understanding about how similar experiences impact Australian visual art students' wellbeing. To explore existing research regarding art students' wellbeing, a review of relevant literature will be split into subsections. First, the review will outline a range of art student

experiences during their university education by detailing student course satisfaction, retention rates, creative pedagogy, and students' relationships with their university staff. This will be followed by a review of research literature describing different art graduate and practitioner experiences, to provide insights regarding students' concerns about their careers. Finally, the limited research that explores the wellbeing of art practitioners and students will be discussed.

### **2.4.1: EXPERIENCES AT UNIVERSITY**

Although limited Australian research addresses the wellbeing of art students on a national scale, there is research that describes their satisfaction with learning at university. QILT (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching) provided a range of national reports on student and graduate experiences at the time of this research. In 2017 and 2018, QILT (2019a) reported art students as having high levels of learner engagement, despite their lower levels of satisfaction with the learner resources.

Findings over four years (2016-2019) from two Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) indicated that art undergraduate students continue to have lower levels of satisfaction with their course and generic skills acquired, but higher levels of satisfaction with their teachers (Table 2.1). However, these generic skills can be difficult to accurately measure given they do not accommodate the rapid change of creative workforce conditions, nor the creative goals of the graduates (Bridgstock, 2009, 2011, 2016).

Creative art students have been at high risk of withdrawing from their Australian university degrees (Cherastidtham et al., 2018). In Australia during 2018, boredom was the most common reason cited by art students who considered leaving their degree, which suggests that the art curriculum was not always supportive of the students' interests that first attracted them to the degree (Cherastidtham et al., 2018). This reason for withdrawal is noteworthy, given academic boredom can influence student wellbeing (Sharp et al., 2020) and academic engagement for visual

art students may be strongly related to their sense of self (Reid & Solomonides, 2007). As Pollard and Wilson (2014) state, art curricula are more effective if they align with students' creative motivations. For example, arts entrepreneurship education that does not accommodate students' interest in their creative practice has potential to limit students' engagement, creative fulfilment, and artistic achievements (Pollard & Wilson, 2014) regardless of how relevant this training is

for students' creative careers (Daniel & Daniel, 2015; Taylor & Luckman, 2020).

National and international literature identifies challenges that further pertain to the nature of art students' tertiary learning. Art education typically does not conform to the systematic qualification processes of higher education, because creativity is learnt in nonlinear, unexpected, unstructured, and iterative ways

**Table 2.1**

*Creative Art Undergraduate Satisfaction and Satisfaction of All Undergraduates (% Agreement) 2016-2019 Findings drawn from the GOS Reports by (QILT, 2016; 2018; 2019a; 2019d)<sup>1</sup>*

	Overall Satisfaction				Good Teaching Scale				Generic Skills Scale			
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2016	2017	2018	2019	2016	2017	2018	2019
Creative Art Undergraduates	74.6	75.9	75.2	75.7	70.1	73.6	72.3	71.6	77.1	77.4	76.4	77.2
All Undergraduates	80.6	79.4	79.7	80.1	63.0	63.0	62.9	63.7	82.1	81.5	81.3	82.4

1. 2016 total undergraduate responses (N=104,208) and creative art graduate responses (n=4,097), 2017 total undergraduate responses (N=120,747) and creative art graduate responses (n=4,527), 2018 total undergraduate responses (N=120,564) and creative art graduate responses (n=4,688), 2019 total undergraduate responses (N=132,176) and creative art graduate responses (n=4,605).

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(Budge et al., 2013; Sawyer, 2019). Given art curricula often depend on individual creative processes, learning is not about rehearsing a fixed canon of knowledge (Shreeve et al., 2010) but is often student-centred and self-regulated (Clarke & Budge, 2010; Greene et al., 2019). Teaching and learning creativity is thus unstable because ideas regarding what is important according to the student's work—in context with society and their prospective industry—is ever changing (Houghton, 2016; Shreeve, et al., 2010). Guiding students' navigation of the unknown is also challenging for visual art teachers, who remain 'powerfully educative' but need to facilitate an environment of trust to nurture each student's independent creation of ideas (Clarke & Budge, 2010; Orr & Shreeve, 2017).

Visual art students are often required to navigate multiple, and sometimes contradictory, learning preferences in their very 'crowded' curriculum (Gunn, 2020; Houghton, 2016). This curriculum often positions students somewhere between expressionism and utilitarianism, or the manual

and philosophical, historic and innovative, or digital and traditional aspects of creative learning (Houghton, 2016; Weida, 2016). Such positioning could depend on teachers' varied and sometimes unstated preferences for implicit pedagogic discourses, such as the [transgressive and therapeutic teaching models](#) (Hjelde, 2020). There is limited discussion regarding how teachers' preferences, and other hidden curricula, affect students' learning (Hjelde, 2020), but as Houghton explains, complex art curricula can impede students' understanding of what it means to be a visual artist:

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“ ... [The visual art curriculum] is riddled with contradictions. It often includes a core it does not believe in. It encourages a Romantic adoption of an autonomous, artistic persona, but also stuffs students full of theory which contradicts this ... It embraces the managerialism of contemporary art practice, while managerialism in

[education threatens to diminish it to what can easily be measured through assessment \(Houghton, 2016, p. 118\).](#)

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Certain methods that are used to teach creative and critical thinking can conflict with visual art students' learning styles and processes. For example, some students have difficulty learning critical theory because they primarily operate as visual and kinaesthetic learners (Blackler, 2014; Raein, 2004; Roxburgh & Caratti, 2018). This could impact the way that students view theoretical or conceptual creative learning, and there are times when students can find aesthetic philosophy 'archaic' or 'irrelevant' compared to the development of technique or manual skills (Connelly & Wolf, 2007; Weida, 2016). Although there are ways for teachers to address students' varied learning styles and values, strategies that bridge the gap between theory and immersive practice may require more time and effort for students to research and incorporate theory into their creative processes (Blackler, 2014).

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Creative tasks and assessments often have ambiguous or incoherent criteria that can be met through multiple creative solutions (Sawyer, 2019; Shreeve et al., 2010). This is to encourage students' risk-taking and exploration of meaningful interpretations, thus enabling creative freedom (Mindel, 2018; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). However, students can feel so achievement-orientated or familiar with "this era of continuous measuring" (Lockheart et al., 2004, p. 96) that they feel anxious about choosing and defending riskier creative ideas (Shreeve et al., 2010; Shulman, 2005). An ambiguous curriculum can also prove difficult for students to gauge if they are on track with their work, which can be frustrating, uncomfortable, and even overwhelming—particularly for students who have been trained to succeed, or who lack confidence or motivation, or who experience unexpected dead ends in their creative solution just before the deadline (Greene et al., 2019; Sawyer, 2018, 2019).

The pressure to work with ambiguous or incoherent benchmarks may be compounded

by expectations for students to create original work on demand (Grant, 2010). For visual artists, creativity often relates to their demonstration of the authenticity and originality of their work (Røyseng et al., 2007; Win, 2014). In higher education, art students engage in long hours of training (Lee, 2019) and are expected to frequently produce original work, unlike some students in other study areas (Grant, 2010; Lipson et al., 2016). This puts pressure on art students, particularly if they believe in the elitist art bias that lacking sufficient original ideas or creative skill indicate a lack of creativity (Glăveanu, 2014; Rocavert, 2016).

Critiques of students' artwork are challenging because students regularly work with personal ideas that can be linked to their identity (Lindström, 2015; Logan, 2013). Although such critiques can reflect the culture of the workforce and lead to positive experiences, they can also be a harrowing experience for students if they are delivered harshly and in public environments (Haugnes & Russell, 2016; Mavri et al., 2020;

Seton & Trouton, 2014). This susceptibility to criticism might be overlooked by teachers during reviews but causes negative emotional load on art students, given their tendency to view assessment submissions as a reflection of their epistemic ability and self-worth (Cloonan, 2008; Mavri et al., 2020). Art practitioners also describe a level of vulnerability or exposure to criticism as increasing with the level of self-expression in their work (Dobson, 2010; Seton & Trouton, 2014). Indeed, some research indicates that artists who elicit "the greatest prevalence" of vulnerability to mental health difficulties engage in more expressive and emotive practice (Kaufman, 2014; Lau, 2016).

As previously discussed ([Section 2.2](#)), students' wellbeing can be influenced by their relationships with teachers, who continue to experience deteriorating working conditions. The increasing casualisation and job insecurity in the academic workforce can be a stressful change for university staff, including art teachers (Kniest, 2018; Miroso et al., 2017) who are likely to have

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casual positions (Bexley et al., 2011). This job insecurity is more keenly felt in study areas that are not a 'national priority' as demonstrated by discipline-based reform packages approved by the Australian government in 2020 (Daly & Lewis, 2020; Grant-Smith et al., 2020; Tjia et al., 2020). University decisions to reduce staff numbers or cut courses often depend on student enrolments and academic productivity (Universities Australia, 2019, 2020a), and previous funding decisions have led to the restructuring or cancellation of creative university and vocational education training courses alike.<sup>[9]</sup>

In response to demand-driven funding, art teachers increasingly deliver structured curriculum content to larger classes without

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9. Although some research literature identifies this change in creative education (e.g., Daniel, 2017a; Frankham, 2006) most current information is sourced from the public domain. These public sources can provide limited evidence, but they do identify past and current course restructures. For more information, see Benton (2020), Boland (2020), Fairley (2020), Keen (2020), Meyrick (2017), Morris (2020), Readman (2020), and Ross (2018).

studio spaces (Clarke & Budge, 2010; Frankham, 2006). These changes are keenly felt by art teachers, who nurture their students' highly personalised, unknown, or new creativity (Brien & Webb, 2008; Clarke & Cripps, 2012) by using teaching models that do not "conform to university viability constraints" (Clarke & Budge, 2010, p. 154). For example, the conventional structures of marking assessment can deter art students' creative experimentation (Mindel, 2018; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). Students thus have limited opportunities to engage in risk-taking for fear of failure, which can impact their resilience and wellbeing (Choi et al., 2019; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). This is particularly so for students who lack the skills to cope with inhibited creative processes (Greason et al., 2015).

A review of extant research literature portrays different views on the way art teachers support their students' wellbeing. In recent Australian research of academics from various study areas, higher numbers of arts and humanities teachers indicated that they respond to the individual

needs of students who have mental health difficulties (Brooker et al., 2017). Additionally, higher numbers of creative industries teachers support students' mental health by building relationships with their students (Brooker et al., 2017). This supports one Australian counsellor's description of art teachers' dedication to their students (Cloonan, 2008). However, Australian literature has also referred to dysfunctional and debilitating creative education that privileges the power of teachers over art students and neglects their wellbeing (Cloonan, 2008; Seton & Trouton, 2014).

Like art practitioners, art students may be intrinsically motivated to create but creatively hampered by external pressures (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; Bennett & Hennekam, 2018). Art students can be motivated by their need to explore and formulate meaningful creative identity, enjoy creative processes, and seek recognition for their creative contributions (Carey, 2015; Daniel, 2018; Reid et al., 2019). Daniel (2018) proposes that artists and art

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students' intrinsic motivations can relate to their wellbeing, given at times the creative process can support their mental health, yet potentially increase their vulnerability to external challenges. For example, students can experience intensely pleasant feelings and engagement while being 'in the zone' and exploring their core creative identity while they create (McDonald, 2008). However, when students experience a 'block' or cannot sustain an elusive state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2014), they experience unpleasant feelings relating to personal, social, or education pressures to perform (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; McDonald, 2008).

Institutionalised learning can restrain or reorient art students' intrinsic motivation to create (Thomas & Chan, 2013). This may be due to the teachers needing to standardise their preparation and delivery of content to meet their university's ethos (Mindel, 2018; Shreeve et al., 2010) or legitimise their performance, given the increased focus on demand-driven funding in Australian education policy (Frankham,

2006). The dominant aesthetic tastes and ethos consequently upheld by staff in art departments can also clash with students' individualised style and concepts (Haugnes & Russell, 2016; Orr & Shreeve, 2017; Seton & Trouton, 2014). Thus, students can feel marginalised because their different ideas, styles, and techniques do not belong with higher education standards, or are considered inherently unacceptable (Cloonan, 2008; Mindel, 2018; Seton & Trouton, 2014).

During university education, art students can experience social isolation (Cloonan, 2008; Røyseng et al., 2007). Not all creative learning is provided through interactive, studio-based practice and some art students prefer to engage in more independent study and practice, which limits their social connections and influences their wellbeing (Kono et al., Tamashiro, 2015; Spaniol, 2001). This was recently a reality for art students who were required to learn in isolation during the COVID-19 outbreak (Dreamson, 2020). Visual art practitioners sometimes prefer to work undisturbed but counteract their isolation by

networking with fellow artists who are nearby (Bain, 2005). At university, peer connectivity and support has been recommended to improve students' wellbeing (Baik et al., 2017; Orygen, 2016, 2020a) but these types of support systems are considered disconnected in Australia, given the impersonal and isolating nature of mass higher education (Baik et al., 2017; Orygen, 2017) and restricted opportunities to build student communities (Naylor et al., 2020).

Visual art students' interactions with their peers have diverse impacts on their wellbeing, depending on how their learning is facilitated. For example, time spent in supportive studio-based environments encourages peers to circulate artistic values, share advice, and help each other learn new creative skills (Logan, 2013). These types of interactions are considered integral to creative learning and are encouraged by teachers (Budge et al., 2013; Shreeve et al., 2010). However, higher art education is also highly competitive (Grant, 2010; Greason et al., 2015) and visual art students might begin to view their

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peer relations as necessary but detrimental to their valued creative autonomy and wellbeing (Thomas & Chan, 2013). These challenges may be more keenly felt during group assessment (Choi et al., 2019; Orr, 2010). In competitive teamwork environments, students are likely to avoid risk-taking, which diminishes their development of resilience and creative processes (Orr, 2010; Smith & Henriksen, 2016).

Given a person's sense of self is socially conditioned (Lindström, 2015), understanding the social positioning of artists is important to better understand their creative identity. Unfortunately, social misconceptions that undermine and devalue creative work still prevail in the general population (Patston et al., 2018; Rocavert, 2016). When considering the technological, economic, and cultural contexts relevant to creativity, Rocavert (2016, p. 234) describes high or traditional art—including certain disciplines pertaining to visual arts—as disrupting “21st-century messages of austerity”. This negative perspective may contribute to the reason why

Australians do not associate themselves with arts, culture, and national narratives, despite their high involvement in creative venues and activities (A New Approach, 2019b).

Certain myths that are accepted in society perpetuate creativity as possessed only by those who are exceptionally talented ‘mad geniuses’ (Patston et al., 2018; Schlesinger, 2014). These misunderstandings dictate that only those with creative talent are creative (Glăveanu, 2014) and ‘serious’ works that can reflect the artist’s mental health difficulties, may be prized more in culture (Runco, 2007; Schlesinger, 2014). Social and romantic misconceptions regard artists as extraneous (Weida, 2016) or obligated to use their creative gifts to serve humanity without economic income (Røyseng et al., 2007; Win, 2014). Such negative opinions can be held by different members of society, including those in media (Schlesinger, 2009), researchers (Simonton, 2014), teachers (Patston et al., 2018; Weida, 2016), counsellors (Greason et al., 2015; Lee,

2019; Murphy, 2017), and the Australian government (Caust, 2017; Loots, 2019).

Such opinions can provide a unique challenge for artists, art educators and art students. In some cases, art students need to habitually defend their decisions to pursue a career in the arts to family and friends (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Jones, 2019; Logan, 2013), given creative art courses—including courses in Australia—can be marginalised as less genuine, serious, or professional areas of scholarship (Brien & Webb, 2008; DASSH, 2018; Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Art students can adopt romantic and unhealthy social positionings, or may need to navigate art bias regarding their mental health (Daniel, 2016b; Gwinner et al., 2009; Lindauer, 2011). For example, students may intentionally isolate and marginalise themselves (Røyseng et al., 2007), feel uncomfortable about receiving appropriate payment (Win, 2014), or forego mental health support (Johnson et al., 2015; Rothenberg, 2001; Schlesinger, 2009).

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Some scholarly literature cautions healthcare workers to prevent art bias from influencing their assessment of artists (Becker, 2014; Greason et al., 2015). It is possible that art students overidentify with mental health difficulties and thus seek more support from available services (Greason et al., 2015), although other counsellors posit that art students regularly visit for positive personal growth reasons (Grant, 2010). Such frequent references to art students' mental health appear counterintuitive considering the strong evidence that creativity enhances peoples' wellbeing (A New Approach, 2019b; King, Scott, & Boggs, 2016a). However, participating in creative therapy is very different to art practice (Brodericka, 2011), given artists generally create work for others (Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014) which often restricts their ability to be creative and flexible, unlike those participating in creative therapy (Davies et al., 2016; Van Lith, 2016).

In-class development of art students' professional identities helps them prepare for their future careers (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018;

Reid et al., 2019). Given the creative workforce is less qualification driven, emphasis is placed on how students demonstrate their creative talent, job skills, and personal attributes (Haukka, 2011). This may be difficult, however, when there are no credible criteria for students to ascertain what it means to be a visual artist (Houghton, 2016; Van Winkel, 2012) nor a standardised trajectory for students after they graduate.<sup>[10]</sup> Regardless, students need to learn how to be highly independent, self-directed, and to establish their identity as artists (Mindel, 2018; Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Students often achieve this by developing their professional identity and articulating the language of their individual practice as they create (Logan, 2013; Shreeve et al., 2010). Although this helps students understand what it means to be an artist and practice art, they potentially lack understanding about what it

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10. For more information, see Banks and Oakley (2016), Bennett and Bridgstock (2015), Comunian and Ooi (2016), Cunningham and Bridgstock (2012), Cunningham et al. (2010), Daniel (2016a), Haukka (2011), and Rosner (2019).

means to work as artists in their prospective industry (Lindström, 2015).

One way for students to achieve further understanding of work as artists is to gain experience through industry engagement, like internships (Daniel & Daniel, 2013). The findings from one Australian study ( $N=503$ ) indicated that internships were most common for those studying or working in the creative arts (15.76%, Interns Australia, 2015). However, it is possible that many artists and art students are willing to become interns for free (Bridgstock, 2011; Stewart, 2019), and the Interns Australia study (2015) reported that art students were paid only 2% to 11% of the time. Internships can also be difficult for some art students to secure and can be more available to students and graduates who are privileged participants of artist networks (Banks & Oakley, 2016; Daniel & Daniel, 2013).

Scholarly literature provides various opinions regarding art students' understanding of work in the creative industries. For example,

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some researchers argue that students can be thwarted in developing realistic professional identities because they harbour romantic misunderstandings about the hard work necessary to become successful practitioners (Bennett, 2009; Bridgstock, 2011; Thomas & Chan, 2013). Contrary to this opinion, one study ( $N$ ="around" 700) indicated that young Australian creatives were not as influenced by romantic ideals and were already working part time in their industry (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). Nevertheless, visual art literature indicates that students can experience anticipatory distress, described as "a deep, almost ethical self-criticism" (Oakley, 2009, p. 288) and fear of not being good enough to enter the industry (Cloonan, 2008; Oakley, 2009). Difficult career prospects are another reason why art students drop out of their degree before completion (Cherastidtham et al., 2018).

#### **2.4.2: CREATIVE WORKFORCE CONDITIONS**

In this section, the nature of the creative workforce and its potential to impact

graduating art students' wellbeing will be explored. A majority of students (83%) in Australian higher education enrol for vocational outcomes (Norton et al., 2018). Art students are no exception, and most aspire to become professional workers in their prospective industry (Hearn et al., 2014). However, the challenges that art students experience in their future career can be difficult to navigate. The following review outlines some of the challenges art graduates and artists experience. However, the referenced research does not provide a complete picture of this population, given creative work is not always defined in an authentic way (Clarke & Budge, 2010) and it is difficult to gauge the types of creative work that students secure (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017).

National Australian research describes art graduates as 'doing badly' with securing employment (Norton et al., 2018; QILT, 2018, 2019b). Despite showing a 23% increase over three years, art graduates from 2016 still had the weakest full-time employment outcomes in 2019

(79.7%), which is 10.4% less than the outcomes of all graduates (QILT, 2019b). The 2019 art undergraduate cohort were also reported as having the lowest employment rate (52.9%) in their first year after graduation, with the third-lowest median full-time salary of \$52,000 (QILT, 2019c). This can be concerning, given financial hardship is linked with mental health difficulties (Cvetkovski et al., 2012; Universities Australia, 2018). The severe impacts of COVID-19 on businesses in the Australian arts and recreation sector, and the governments' largely inadequate response to support artists' financial difficulties, also demonstrate recent financial challenges for artists (Coates et al., 2020; Fielding & Trembath, 2020b; Flew & Kirkwood, 2020).

The Australian creative arts community has arguably been involved in a difficult relationship with the government (Caust, 2017; Fielding & Trembath, 2020b). In Australia, the social function of the arts is framed by revenue, and the average per capita expenditure from the Australian federal government remains low (Fielding & Trembath,

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2020b; Loots, 2019). Australia's global positioning in expenditure for the creative arts, and global creative trade performance and innovation, is consequently lower than other countries (A New Approach, 2019a, 2019b). Limited funding has proven difficult for the already competitive creative industries, where major performing art organisations can often receive the majority of funding (Caust, 2017; Loots, 2019). This restricted funding hinders the production of creative work and the opportunity for creative work to benefit the wellbeing of Australians:

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“ We [the arts] have a powerful tool for enhancing social harmony, engagement and community connectivity but it is currently underutilised in Australia (A New Approach, 2019b, p. 12). ”

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Similar to other creative workers, visual artists can face challenges regarding economic factors (A New Approach, 2019b; Throsby &

Petetskaya, 2017). Creative employment is increasing rapidly—albeit not in pace with the rest of the Australian workforce—and there is more potential for graduates to find higher paid creative service jobs in fields such as marketing, digital content, and design (Cunningham & Bridgstock, 2012; Cunningham & McCutcheon, 2018a, 2018b). However, workers in visual art cultural production have much lower incomes than the total workforce, and the rate of job growth has been in decline since 1996 (Cunningham & McCutcheon, 2018a). Some visual artists are therefore at high risk of unemployment, even though difficulty entering the workforce is not prolonged for most art graduates, and artists' unemployment can be voluntarily (Zawadzki, 2016).

Other research literature describes creative work as characterised by insecurity (Lindström, 2017). Art graduates often need to shift between multiple contract jobs, professional identities, and roles to financially support themselves when they work in the arts sector (Bridgstock,

2016; Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017; Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014). Other art graduates will not secure core creative work in their industry, but will instead be embedded in other sectors (Cunningham, 2014; Hearn et al., 2014). Although some artists find 'non-arts work' positive (Throsby & Zednik, 2011) it can be difficult for students to accept because they believe their education is wasted if they are unable to obtain core creative work (Ashton, 2015; Hearn et al., 2014). Such precarious characteristics of the creative workforce are now identified in other sectors<sup>11</sup> and are considered detrimental to employee attitudes and wellbeing (Herr et al., 2004).

Although the creative workforce is precarious, there are many opportunities for artists to enjoy heightened meaning, autonomy, and pleasure in their work (Lindström, 2017). Art students also have pleasant experiences at university (McDonald, 2008; Reid et al., 2019) which might

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11. For more information, see Cunningham (2014), Gill and Pratt (2008), Lindström (2017), McRobbie (2016), and Van Vianen et al. (2008).

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explain why some are later motivated by ‘psychic income,’ or working primarily for the meaning and satisfaction of doing their work, not the monetary value of their labour (Brook, 2013; Daniel & Johnstone, 2015; Fujiwara & Lawton, 2016). Research literature often highlights the way artists are deeply attached to their art and how they value intense moments of engagement, self-expression, and self-actualisation—despite sometimes investing unhealthy levels of emotion and time into their creations (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McKay, 2014). Additionally, some artists can view their artwork as more than ‘normal’ and ‘unfree’ work but rather an essential part of their identity and sense of being (Lindström, 2017).

Despite these pleasant experiences, there is substantial evidence that graduates experience many challenges that impact their wellbeing. For example, Australian art graduates can experience a high risk of burnout, difficulty adjusting to the realities of work, multiple entry attempts, and fierce competition for limited creative

work, where employment can be determined by social behaviours rather than professional skills.<sup>[12]</sup> Visual artists can also experience difficulty engaging with higher standards of technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and commercialism to become market savvy (Andrew & Luckman, 2015; Gonithellis, 2018; Win, 2014). These features of creative work can influence an artists’ sense of self—leading to insecurity, substance misuse, physical illness, and mental health difficulties (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gonithellis, 2018; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). More comprehensive Australian research of artists’ wellbeing will be explored next.

### **2.4.3: KEY AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH ON THE WELLBEING OF ARTISTS**

Since 2015, key Australian research detailing the wellbeing of performing and visual artists has been published. In one world-first research

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12. For more information, see Bennett and Bridgstock (2015), Bridgstock (2011), Comunian et al. (2010), Cunningham (2014), Daniel (2018), Energx (2019), Hearn et al. (2014), and Reid et al. (2019).

project (Cooper, 2017), the researchers Eynde, Fisher, and Sonn (2016) examined the wellbeing of Australian entertainment workers including performing artists, support workers, and equipment operators.<sup>[13]</sup> The findings from their survey ( $N=2407$ ) and interviews ( $N=36$ ) identified serious concerns regarding irregular and unstable work conditions; low income; tendency to hide physical, personal, or psychological problems; bullying; sexual assault; sexism; and racism in the workplace. Furthermore, the participants indicated poor mental functioning; higher rates of moderate to severe anxiety and depression; and higher rates of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts compared to the Australian population.

Eynde et al. (2016) recommended a range of interventions to improve the wellbeing of Australian entertainment workers. In response

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13. This research was funded and conducted in collaboration with Entertainment Assist, who also developed the Australian Alliance for Wellness in Entertainment (AAWE) initiative. For more information, visit: [www.entertainmentassist.org.au/wellness](http://www.entertainmentassist.org.au/wellness).

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to these findings and recommendations, Entertainment Assist and Arts Centre Melbourne partnered together to establish the Arts Wellbeing Collective.<sup>[14]</sup> This initiative received funding to build on the success of their 2017 program and has since continued to provide sector initiatives, workshops, mental health first aid courses, a national phone counselling service, and other resources to improve the wellbeing of performing artists (Kitney, 2019; The Arts Wellbeing Collective, 2019). In 2019, the initiative had 304 member organisations and was honoured as a winner of the Martin Seligman Health and Wellbeing Award and a finalist in the VicHealth Awards (The Arts Wellbeing Collective, 2019).

In 2015, Maxwell and colleagues examined the stress factors and wellbeing of Australian actors ( $N=782$ ). Their research similarly indicated that participants had higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress than the Australian adult

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14. For more information about the collective, visit [www.artswellbeingcollective.com.au/about](http://www.artswellbeingcollective.com.au/about).

population. The participants' higher levels of stress were often associated with low income, bullying and harassment, and performance anxiety. Additionally, participants also indicated the use of maladaptive coping strategies including use of alcohol and illicit substances (Maxwell et al., 2015). Despite these findings, participants more frequently indicated positive levels of life satisfaction, which could relate to actors being aware and prepared to manage challenges relevant to the industry, or their predisposition for maintaining optimism, given "actors might be understood as following and living their passion" (Maxwell et al., 2015 p. 109).

In a smaller study ( $N=20$ ), Robb and colleagues (2016) individually interviewed twenty actors from South Australia. These in-depth interviews revealed high levels of financial instability, job loss, and alcohol use. In this research, the participants described themselves as marginalised, which consequently raised their positive expressions of being unique, or negative expressions of shame and insecurity.

When in between work, these participants referred to feeling fear, loss of identity, and difficulty disengaging from these feelings given their heightened self-awareness. Hence, the researchers recommended further training for actors to successfully navigate such personal and environmental challenges in their work (Robb et al., 2016).

The research previously discussed in this section focussed on the wellbeing of performing artists, not visual artists. National research that addresses the wellbeing of all Australian artists is limited, but provides insights regarding the differences in life satisfaction across artistic occupations (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017). To give an overview of Australian artists' subjective wellbeing, Throsby and Petetskaya (2017) included one item in their national survey ( $N=8,859$ ) for participants to indicate their satisfaction with life. The average score for this question revealed that artists were generally as satisfied as the Australian population, with visual artists and actors experiencing slightly

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less satisfaction than other artists. However, the researchers claimed more detailed research is required to provide accurate views on artists' satisfaction with their life as an artist.

A review of literature that intentionally addresses the mental health and wellbeing of Australian visual artists is quite recent in terms of published research. This research is the Mentally Healthy study and the Creative Industry Mental Health study, conducted through the collaborative efforts of Never Not Creative, Everymind, UnLtd, Mentally Healthy, and Tank, (Everymind, 2018; Mentally Healthy, 2020; Tank, 2019). These two studies provide evidence regarding the mental health of Australian and international workers in the media, marketing, and creative sector. The 2018 and 2020 Mentally Healthy study is outlined next, followed by an overview of the Creative Industry Mental Health study.

The research conducted by Mentally Healthy provided evidence on the “well-known, but

often ignored problem” of mental health in the creative industries (Everymind, 2018, para. 10). The 2020 Mentally Healthy study ( $N=1,577$ ) assessed the perspective of Australian media (40%), marketing (13%), and creative (39%) workers regarding wellbeing challenges and mental health (Mentally Healthy, 2020). Findings from both the 2018 and 2020 study indicate that these participants experienced higher rates of mild to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety than the national average (Mentally Healthy, 2020; Never Not Creative et al., 2018). Since the 2018 study, efforts to discuss the topic of mental health in these creative workplaces had begun to make an impact, given more participants (24%) felt comfortable with mental health disclosure and management in the 2020 study (Mentally Healthy, 2020).

Further research was conducted recently to measure the impact of COVID-19 on these Australian creative workers (Mentally Healthy, 2020). The findings from this research revealed that the participants' anxiety was slightly

reduced, depression had slightly increased, and there was evidence that some participants engaged in more adaptive coping strategies because of their increased time to consider healthier lifestyle choices (Design Business Council et al., 2020; Mentally Healthy, 2020). By combining these findings over 18 months, it can be seen that the Australian creative, media, and marketing workers are mental health literate and can seek help more than other workplaces (Mentally Healthy, 2020; Never Not Creative et al., 2018). However, structural and cultural transformation remains necessary for these industries to support workers' mental health and improve their work experiences (Mentally Healthy, 2020).

The Creative Industry Mental Health report, published by Tank (2019), showcased findings from participants in 55 countries, with a majority living in Australia ( $n=701$ ). This 2019 annual report ( $N=1407$ ) had grown in scope since the inaugural study in 2018 ( $N=358$ ), with respondents including product design,

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graphic design, fashion, marketing, technology, software development, and interactive design workers (Tank, 2018, 2019). Findings from the 2019 report indicate that 79.4% of the participants thought their job contributed to their mental health difficulties, despite many (58%) being satisfied with how flexible their workplace was (Tank, 2019). The research participants—including students and job seekers—raised issues regarding stigma, unemployment, poor work practice, poor leadership, long hours, loneliness, bullying, racism, and sexism (Tank, 2018, 2019).

Although many of the findings presented in this section are concerning, there is evidence of positively associated factors that increase artists' wellbeing. For example, the Australian performing artists in the research conducted by Eynde et al. (2016) described passion and commitment to their industry, as well as pleasure and joy in their work. Robb et al. (2016) also reported positive factors in the Australian acting industry including actors' high levels

of engagement, meaning, and strong peer support, as well as opportunities to explore, practise empathy, and improvise as they worked. Finally, the visual art participants in the Mentally Healthy studies reported enjoyment of autonomy in the workplace, having a variety of different and new tasks, and further opportunities to learn (Mentally Healthy, 2020; Never Not Creative et al., 2018).

There is reassuring evidence that Australian visual art communities are actively pursuing wellbeing support for their industries. In the visual arts, the Mentally Healthy Change Group<sup>15</sup> drives discussion and collaborative problem solving to address the wellbeing needs of those in the creative industries. This group provides access to a range of free resources, including the Heart On My Sleeve storybook, and Minimum Standards for Mental Health resource for creative industry workers to better manage their wellbeing (Heart On My Sleeve, 2019;

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15. For more information visit [www.mentally-healthy.org](http://www.mentally-healthy.org) and [www.nevernotcreative.org](http://www.nevernotcreative.org)

Mentally Healthy, 2019). A founding partner of the Mentally Healthy Change Group, the Never Not Creative community, also advocates for the further support of emerging talent through change group initiatives, a Facebook group platform and free resources (Never Not Creative, 2019; Wright, 2018a, 2018b).

Additional online discussions are also available for art students to learn more about mental health in their industry. For example, designer Jessica Walsh started an online project, Let's Talk About Mental Health, that addresses the stigma around mental health (Jacoby, 2016). This project shares contributors' stories about current challenges that they are experiencing, recovery from mental health challenges, or any unfiltered thoughts that address the messier aspects of human life (Walsh, 2016). Similar websites including Gabberish (2018) and the Real Talk project (Palaskas, 2017) facilitate online discussions about wellbeing and mental health challenges for artists and

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other members of the creative community.<sup>[16]</sup> While these resources are helpful for visual art students, they do not specifically address the challenges that can impact their wellbeing while studying at university.

#### **2.4.4: RESEARCH ON THE WELLBEING OF ART STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY**

National data that intentionally address the wellbeing of Australian university students is limited (Rickwood et al., 2017). Research that stratifies findings about Australian university students' wellbeing into study areas is also limited (Baik et al., 2019; Larcombe et al., 2016). Some research, however, focusses on art students' wellbeing and the different ways that they appraise and manage stressful challenges. Although these research projects are often founded on the self-reports of voluntary respondents and thus provide limited

evidence (Greason et al., 2015; Lipson et al., 2016), the research reveals insights regarding the challenges and strengths that are unique to these students' chosen area of creative art study. This section, therefore, explores global research addressing the wellbeing of art students.

To investigate law students' wellbeing, one Australian study compared their levels of distress with other Australian students (Larcombe et al., 2015). In this study 4, 711 undergraduate and masters students—stratified into law, engineering, science, veterinary medicine, art, and biomedicine disciplines—participated in a survey. This sample consisted of undergraduate Bachelor of Art students ( $n=1, 244$ ) who reported higher rates of anxiety and depression than students in any other field. When comparing the difference between Bachelor of Arts students and law students, Larcombe et al. found that the art students' average anxiety score was significantly higher ( $+0.98, p < 0.001$ ). The Bachelor of Art students were

similar to veterinary medicine students who also reported higher levels of stress. Although confirmatory research is necessary, these findings suggest that Australian art students also have wellbeing needs that can be addressed during their education.

Research from the United States also provides insights regarding art students' mental health. Despite reporting higher stress levels and use of mental health services, art students ( $n=607$ ) in Greason et al.'s research (2015) indicated similar mental health difficulty than students in different study areas ( $n=87, 105$ ). Another study of undergraduate, master, and doctorate students ( $N=64, 519$ ) "consistently confirmed" an "increased likelihood of mental health difficulties" for art and design students, as well as students studying in the humanities (Lipson et al., 2016, p. 34). The undergraduate art and design students from this study reported high levels of depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, and self-harm—as did social work and humanities students. Lipson et al. (2016)

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16. For more information visit 12 Kinds of Kindness <https://letstalk.12kindsofkindness.com>; Gabberish, [www.gabberish.com](http://www.gabberish.com); and Real Talk [www.kitiyapalaskas.com](http://www.kitiyapalaskas.com).

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explained these findings by detailing stressors unique to art and design students:

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“ Art students receive a certain level of technical training as well, but have constant pressure towards innovation and originality. Instructor critiques may also be quite harsh and sometimes delivered in a public setting. Furthermore, some art students may be negatively affected by a highly competitive environment ... (Lipson et al., 2016, pp. 35-36).

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In another United States study, Elias and Berg-Cross (2009) conducted empirical research that explored the wellbeing of fine art students ( $N=75$ ). This study did not use validated measurement scales to determine the wellbeing of participants, but compared responses to three motivational models that were adapted from various questionnaires. These three models, or

artistic identities—Visionary Artist, Self-Actualized Artist, and Commodity—are described in the authors' methods. Although the findings suggest that artists who identified with the Commodity and Self-Actualized models were 'healthier', the entire sample had poorer wellbeing compared to the general population. For example, a higher percentage of participants took antidepressants (+11%), anxiolytic medication (+4%), and 21% smoked (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009).

Other international research provides similar findings. In the United Kingdom, one study ( $N=4,699$ ) conducted by Cook et al. revealed that first-year art students ( $n=1,024$ ) had poorer average wellbeing (+1.0) than students studying science and other disciplines (Cooke et al., 2006). In India, Naik and Sundaramoorthy's 2016 research ( $N=171$ ) indicated that art students more frequently reported depressive symptoms compared to science students. These researchers proposed that the findings related to students' uncertain career opportunities in India (Naik

& Sundaramoorthy, 2016). In Japan, Kono et al. (2015) measured the depressive symptoms of international students. The independent relationship between the participants' academic field and depressive symptoms was not measured in this study. However, Kono et al. (2015) noticed that art students had higher levels of depression than science students, and speculated that this was due to art students' tendency to work in isolation.

As described in this literature review, art students' university experience involves factors that can influence their mental health and wellbeing. Although some research suggests that art students are more vulnerable to challenges and use maladaptive strategies to cope (Carson, 2011; Papworth, 2014), the evidence is not conclusive (Greason et al., 2015). Indeed, art students use a range of strategies to cope with any challenges they experience. These strategies range from creative practice (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009; Heise, 2014; Spaniol, 2001) to seeking help

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from teachers (Brooker et al., 2017), or from substance misuse (Daniel, 2018) to using counselling services and medication (Greason et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2014). Art students might also engage in emotion work, described by Lindström (2017) as artists acknowledging the unknown and negative aspects of their career, but working with expectation, trust, and hope for being able to endure as creative individuals.

## 2.5: CONCLUDING THE LITERATURE REVIEW BY IDENTIFYING THE VALUE OF FURTHER RESEARCH

This chapter reviewed the literature discussing factors that can influence the wellbeing of Australian undergraduates, and art undergraduates as they experience Australian higher education. Some of this literature identified a gap in Australian research that addresses the wellbeing, mental health, and resilience needs of university students on a national level (Orygen, 2017; Rickwood et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is little existing research that purposefully describes

the unique strengths of Australian students and the challenges they experience according to their study area, including their unique voice and values, how they respond to challenges, and how this impacts their wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019; Larcombe et al., 2016; Orygen, 2017). More research that focusses on students' discipline or community differences is necessary for the development of evidence-based, effective, and sustainable wellbeing interventions.

“ Too many wellbeing programs are imposed without the care taken to consider existing values within communities before they are integrated (White, 2016, p. 4).

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Australian university students can benefit from interventions that are uniquely tailored to their disciplinary and wellbeing needs. Such discipline-specific interventions could prove to be more relevant and engaging for student

learning (Andrews & Chong, 2011; Eynde et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2016). This proposition, and the lack of research literature regarding the wellbeing needs of visual art students (Siddins, 2019), justifies the need for further research—to provide an evidence base for reform that supports students' wellbeing in Australian visual art degrees. Supporting the wellbeing of art students during their education can benefit their creative work, and consequently, the wellbeing of the Australian population (A New Approach, 2019b; Australia Council for the Arts, 2020).

Creativity thrives in supportive environments (Clarke & Budge, 2010). By developing more supportive educational environments to enhance the wellbeing and resilience of art students, these students can have further opportunities to enhance their creative skills and outcomes as practicing artists (Rothenberg, 2001; Runco, 2007; Rybakowski & Klonowska, 2011). This has potential to benefit the culture, economy, and wellbeing of Australians, given creative and cultural work

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helps establish peoples' sense of belonging, social cohesion, and community engagement while also enhancing their mental health (A New Approach, 2019b; Fielding & Trembath, 2020a; Smithies & Fujiwara, 2015). Funding from the Australian Council for the Arts has been focussed on community art to support the wellbeing of Australians (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020). One in seven workers who hold creative qualifications are positioned in the fastest-growing Australian industries, which indicates that new creative art graduates can also make a "vital contribution towards the goals of Australia's innovation agenda" (A New Approach, 2019a, p. 31).

Optimal wellbeing is necessary for university students to reach their potential with purpose and meaning in their life (Carter et al., 2017; Margrove, 2015). As previously discussed ([Section 2.1](#)), universities are well positioned to promote and support students' wellbeing as they experience higher education (Fernandez et al., 2016). Given mental health difficulties

are associated with students' lower academic engagement and performance, decreased retention rates, lower rates of employment, lower income, and poorer living standards,<sup>[17]</sup> purposefully improving student experiences and enhancing student wellbeing at university has the potential to increase their academic endeavours and career outcomes (Productivity Commission, 2020; Schreiner et al., 2009). This is also possible for art students, who can benefit from learning strategies to enhance their personal and professional wellbeing (Daniel, 2018; Daniel & Johnstone, 2017).

Improving the wellbeing and resilience of art graduates will economically benefit Australian communities. By supporting university students' development of resilience and wellbeing management before they enter the workforce, there is potential for graduates to

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17. For more information, see Andrews and Chong (2011), Brooker et al. (2017), Cvetkovski et al. (2012), Kilpatrick et al. (2017), Productivity Commission (2020), QILT (2019a), Stallman (2010), and Veness (2016).

better contribute to workforce productivity and economic participation.<sup>[18]</sup> Providing art students with further preparation and resilience training, before they graduate and enter their prospective workforce, could also increase their likelihood of sustained professional wellbeing and successful career trajectories (Bridgstock, 2011; Daniel & Johnstone, 2017). Hence, these emerging artists have the potential to sustain their contributions to the \$111.7 billion Australian cultural and creative economy, while potentially increasing positive international relations, trust, and tourism (A New Approach, 2019b).

Australian universities and art departments are ethically obligated to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their students (Baik et al., 2019; Seton & Trouton, 2014). To provide further evidence that supports visual art wellbeing intervention, this doctorate research upholds

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18. For more information, see Mental Health Australia and KPMG (2018), Mission Australia (2019), Productivity Commission (2020) and Rickwood et al. (2017).

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the stance that students should feel empowered to foster their resilience and wellbeing during their education. However, some art students can experience power issues at university that diminish their agency (Cloonan, 2008; Seton & Trouton, 2014) or social misconceptions that lead to unpleasant student experiences (Barrantes-Vidal, 2014; Daniel, 2018; Swindells et al., 2013). The literature indicates that the worldviews and language used in curricula can reflect and reinforce the perspectives of marginalised people in society (Egbo, 2005). It is thus important for students to be empowered during their education, as agents who can also improve the circumstances of their own learning and reinforce healthier social perspectives of their creative identity.

One way university staff can empower art students is by acknowledging and acting upon students' opinions regarding ways to improve their curriculum (Gibson, 2010). University students are the primary stewards of their wellbeing and providers of valuable

insights into how to enhance and sustain their wellbeing during their education (Baik et al., 2019; Bland & Atweh, 2007; Busher, 2012). However, studies that explore Australian undergraduate opinions on the matter are limited (Baik et al., 2019). This doctorate research thus prioritises the voices of visual art students by positioning them as co-producers of the research recommendations (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). The theoretical lens and methodology underpinning this research will be discussed in the next chapter.



# METHODOLOGY

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## 3.1: SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

As discussed in [Section 1.1](#), this research seeks to accurately represent the opinions of visual art students in Australian higher education. To do so, the transformative paradigm was adopted to provide further understanding of the visual art student community in higher education and ways to respectfully and effectively enhance student wellbeing. The transformative paradigm supports multiple social theories, including positive psychology, wellbeing, and resilience theories (Seligman, 2011; Sweetman et al., 2010; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). In this research, both the transformative paradigm, wellbeing, and resilience theory were used to shape the design of this parallel mixed methods research. The transformative paradigm ([Section 3.2](#)), theoretical lens ([Section 3.3](#)), mixed methodology rationale ([Section 3.4](#)), and method design ([Section 3.5](#)) will be detailed in the following sections.

## 3.2: THE TRANSFORMATIVE PARADIGM

The transformative paradigm is considered an umbrella worldview that mixes different

paradigmatic perspectives (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). By amalgamating multiple strands of philosophy (Mertens & Wilson, 2012), the transformative paradigm ensures that “not a single context of social inquiry” is missed when advocating for social justice and human rights (Mertens, 2009a, p. 4). For example, one philosophical strand that is applied in transformative research is critical theory—a theory that evaluates the ‘taken for granted’ power within diverse social dimensions (Howell, 2013; Kinchelo & McLaren, 2005). Other theories that contribute to the transformative paradigm include: feminism, critical race, queer, and disability theory (Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Sweetman et al., 2010). The transformative paradigm requires that the voices of an oppressed community are heard, often by involving them in participatory action research: a social process that involves community-based ownership of research, analysis of social problems and focus on social action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Mertens, 2015).

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Researchers who operate within the transformative paradigm accept that reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 2009a). Therefore, interpretations of reality can be understood because of the power associated with social groups (Mertens, 2009a). By adopting this framework, transformative researchers critically examine their reality—and the reality of their participants—by noticing how complex social, historical and cultural contexts shape it (Mertens, 2005; Qutoshi, 2015). Rather than ‘throwing away’ their personal knowledge and value biases, transformative researchers acknowledge and build upon their own values (Heron & Reason, 2006). Transformative researchers admittedly hope that their values will influence their research to help achieve transformation in their participants (Ponterotto, 2005). This critical subjectivity of researcher perspectives generates deeper collaboration with the researcher and participant views of reality, thus cultivating a rigorous and reflective perspective of the research findings (Biddle & Schafft, 2015; Heron & Reason, 2006).

Transformative researchers represent the voices of the researched better by building interactional, and trusting relationships (Egbo, 2005). These transformative researchers explicitly and respectfully position themselves “side by side with the less powerful” to find ways of empowering their participants (Mertens, 2015, p. 21). With regards to this research, the transformative approach was adopted to help visual art students feel more confident and comfortable with providing unique opinions about their mental health and wellbeing. Rather than supporting a ‘blame the victim’ (Mertens, 2009a) or ‘blame the student’ mentality (Biggs, 2012), this research perceives visual art students as powerful and resilient agents who can affect social transformation within their communities by using their own unique culture and language.

By adopting a transformative paradigm for this research, the voices of visual art students were prioritised to construct an evidence base for future educational reform. Accordingly, this research enabled visual art students to

participate in decision-making processes and choose how their education can enhance their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of visual art students in the future. Such collaborative partnerships between the researcher and participants have been embraced by other transformative researchers. For example, Underhill and McDonald (2010) sought transformation to meet university students’ needs through a partnership with the tutors:

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“ We found that real reform means finding new ways of working together to inspire change. Finding ourselves like travelers, we saw ourselves as agents of change, encouraging innovation in each other (Underhill & McDonald, 2010, p. 104).

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As noted in this example, some researchers engage academic and administrative staff as primary decision-makers for educational

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reform (Cook-Sather et al., 2018). Furthermore, university staff and researchers can view student feedback and ideas as tokenistic rather than a powerful influence on change.<sup>19</sup> This potentially undermines the effectiveness of wellbeing interventions for students, given each student intimately understands and primarily stewards their wellbeing ([Section 2.5](#)). Consulting students as co-producers of the research recommendations disrupts any power privileges held over students, enabling the students to build trust with the researcher and freely express their own voice (Bovill et al., 2011; Matthews et al., 2018). Therefore, in this research, students were viewed as valuable agents (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019) and their opinions were prioritised as central to providing recommendations for transformation within creative art degrees.

The transformative paradigm was adopted to accommodate multiple complexities within this

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19. For more information, see Blee et al. (2015), Busher (2012), Huddy (2016), and McAlpine and Norton (2006).

research. Tertiary students experience various complex interactions that can impact their mental health and wellbeing during their education (Andrews, 2016; Landstedt et al., 2016). Providing ways to protect and enhance the mental health of these students is difficult, given the confounding variables and culturally diverse manifestations of wellbeing (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Indeed, wellbeing is commonly described as a complex and multifaceted state (Schultze-Lutter et al., 2016; Thieme et al., 2015). With consideration of these complexities, the transformative paradigm is ideal because it uses a multi-structured mixed methods approach and crystallised interpretation of participant views (Mertens, 2009). The mixed methodology is discussed further in [Section 3.4](#), while data analysis and interpretation is discussed further in [Chapter 4](#).

### **3.3: THE THEORETICAL LENS – WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE THEORY**

The philosophical assumptions drawn from the transformative paradigm further inform a theoretical stance, thus providing a foundation

for methodological decisions. In this research, wellbeing and resilience theory (Seligman et al., 2005; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011) was applied to inform the design of research methods. Both the resilience theory and positive psychology (which is the foundation for wellbeing theory, see Seligman, 2011) are purposefully included in the transformative paradigm (Sweetman et al., 2010) which is visualised as an umbrella in [Figure 3.1](#) below. This means that the transformative, wellbeing, and resilience theories can overlap. The characteristics of wellbeing and resilience theories are outlined next to provide further context on the research design.

Wellbeing theory (Seligman, 2011) supports the multifaceted nature of wellbeing by identifying various elements that are founded on positive psychology ([Table 3.1](#)). This theory reflects an intent of positive psychology: to perceive the development of an individual's strengths as an effective therapy, rather than focusing on the absence of ill health (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In order to achieve a "full

picture of human flourishing” (Forgeard et al., 2011, p. 98), wellbeing theory integrates a range of eudaimonic and hedonic indicators through five elements—or pillars—of wellbeing (Lambert et al., 2015). These five elements are labelled PERMA and include positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).

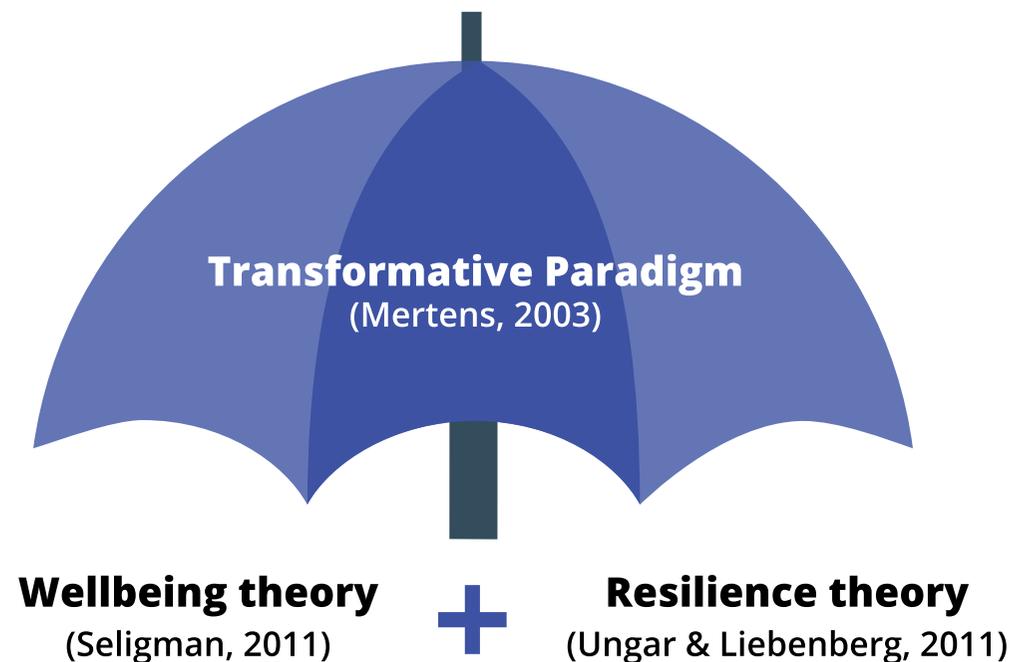
One purpose of wellbeing theory is to identify promising areas for intervention and positive change (Huppert & So, 2013). To do so, researchers recommend thoroughly examining multiple aspects of participants’ wellbeing (Scorsolini-Comin et al., 2013). Such a multifaceted approach requires blending eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing indicators (Ágota et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2015). Wellbeing theory meets these requirements, given it provides a ‘dashboard’ of subjective and objective measures, with the intent to address multiple aspects of wellbeing.<sup>[20]</sup> Although

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20. For more information, see Adler and Seligman (2016), Huppert and So (2013), Kern et al. (2015), and Seligman (2018).

**Figure 3.1**

*The Transformative Paradigm as an ‘Umbrella’ for this Theoretical Framework*



criticised by some for being grounded in Western assumptions and not representing an exhaustive list of variables (Christopher et al., 2008; Goodman et al., 2018; Kashdan, 2017), PERMA is supported in other research literature as a good

start in accurately predicting how populations can flourish (Coffey et al., 2016; Kern et al., 2015; Lopez et al., 2015). This theory also references resilience by describing the construct as a feature of wellbeing (Seligman, 2011).

**Table 3.1**

*Overview of the Five Elements of PERMA (2011, pp. 16-20)*

Element	Element description
Positive emotion	Being optimistic and enjoying life (life satisfaction), referred to as subjective and the “cornerstone” of wellbeing theory.
Engagement	Flow and enjoyment of learning new things and/or working on a project. Engagement is measured subjectively.
Positive relationships	Social connections and interactions with people. Positive relationships can be subjectively and objectively measured.
Meaning	Enjoying the purpose and value associated with actions. Meaning can be measured subjectively and objectively
Accomplishment	Achieving for the sake of fulfilment and satisfaction. Accomplishment can also be subjectively and objectively measured.

Resilience theory is described as inherently linked to research that expands the topic of social justice (Mertens, 2009b; Southwick et al., 2014). Similar to wellbeing theory, resilience theory aims to identify the best ways for people to bounce back from challenges—and to find

times for effective intervention to benefit people who are vulnerable to challenges (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Panter-Brick, 2015). Resilience researchers encourage wellbeing trajectories that help people bounce back from challenges, and bounce forward into wellbeing (Panter-Brick,

2015). Sustaining these wellbeing trajectories requires the maintenance of biological, social, psychological and cultural dimensions of resilience (Panter-Brick, 2015; Southwick et al., 2014). The contextual and multifaceted complexity of both resilience and wellbeing requires careful examination and cautious implementation of intervention:

“When understanding something as ambiguous as well-being, it seems naive to assume that researchers who are living lives different from a study’s participants should be able to decide the criteria for successful adaptation (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, p. 10).

Resilience theory acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and dominant concepts about resilience are generally crafted by those with the loudest voice (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Researchers are thus encouraged to be

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reflexive and humble about their own limited knowledge of their participants, including their participants' perception of resilience. The inclusion and centralisation of marginalised voices through mixed methods research can help achieve reliable and trustworthy findings that provide an in-depth understanding of wellbeing and resilience (Este, Sitter, & Maclaurin, 2009; Liebenberg, 2009; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Cameron (2009, p. 241) argues that meaningful and timely integration of multiple research approaches is necessary to "afford richer data that integrate theories and uncover contradictions". Hence, the careful design of mixed methods for this research presented investigative rigour and comprehensive outcomes (Cameron, 2009).

### **3.4: MIXED METHODOLOGY – USING A TRANSFORMATIVE PARALLEL MIXED METHODS APPROACH**

Mixed methodology can be described as a third major methodological movement. The mixed methods approach provides a natural outlet

for enquiry through multiple ways of seeing and hearing (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Mixed methods research promotes deeper researcher engagement with data and provides analytical flexibility, rigour, and density by having one phase of research build upon the other (Fielding, 2008). This approach is used because it "enables the researcher to simultaneously ask confirmatory and exploratory questions" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 33). The integration of mixed methods in this research is viewed as a viable way to promote social transformation (Cameron, 2009) and respectfully present the complexity of phenomena across diverse populations, including those who are considered marginalised (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011).

A parallel mixed methods approach was chosen for this research. Parallel mixed methods designs, otherwise called triangulation, convergent, or concurrent designs, are considered the most well-known mixed methods approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In parallel designs, one research question is addressed by collecting

quantitative and qualitative data at the same time, analysing the data separately, then merging both data sets for an overall inference (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This approach provides efficiency and flexibility for researchers by enabling the collection and analysis of different strands of data separately (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). By leveraging both qualitative and quantitative methods, mixing data can complement the strengths of each approach and mitigate any overlapping weaknesses (Este et al., 2009). For example, in-depth qualitative interviews provide comparative insights into unambiguous quantitative data, allowing a plethora of details to be gathered from participants (Este et al., 2009).

Parallel mixed designs are considered very powerful, but challenging for researchers (Creswell et al., 2008). Problems might arise during analysis and interpretation of data if there are discrepancies and inconsistencies within data sources (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Such contradictions in data comparisons, however,

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could lead to new ways of thinking (Hammond, 2005). Cameron (2009, p. 226) cautions against “loosely coordinated application of different methods” that compound research error and leave the researcher without both strands of research fully examined. However, if conducted with rigour and attention to detail, the mixed approach can expose weak evidence or gaps in a researcher’s argument (Fielding 2008). Parallel designs also provide a logistical challenge for researchers, who are required to conduct multiple research strands simultaneously (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). However, this type of research does not have to be exactly concurrent (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011) and multiple strands can occur with a short time lag (Mertens, 2015).

The parallel mixed methods design for this research prioritised qualitative research within the framework of a transformative perspective. Although quantitative and qualitative strands generally have equal priority in parallel designs

(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), this research focussed on a descriptive illustration of research findings to better address the nature of the research questions and objectives (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Hence, this research was designed with primary consideration of qualitative features, including the five features of qualitative research provided by Yin (2016, p. 7):

1. studying the meaning of people’s lives under real-world conditions,
2. representing the views and perspectives of participants in the study,
3. covering the contextual conditions within which people live,
4. contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behaviour, and
5. striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone.

By prioritising qualitative approaches in the mixed methods design, deeper meaning and

context is sought through smaller samples (Yin, 2016). Therefore, researching smaller samples achieves a reflexive, culturally-grounded and well-integrated representation of participants’ wellbeing (Panter-Brick, 2015). From a transformative perspective, qualitative research provides sensitivity to marginalised communities and represents issues of need that may be highlighted in quantitative research (Sweetman et al., 2010). Adopting a transformative, parallel design thus provides a framework for rigorous examination of research themes and measures, to promote change and social justice for under-represented populations (Mertens, 2015; Sweetman et al., 2010).

### **3.5: THE METHOD DESIGN**

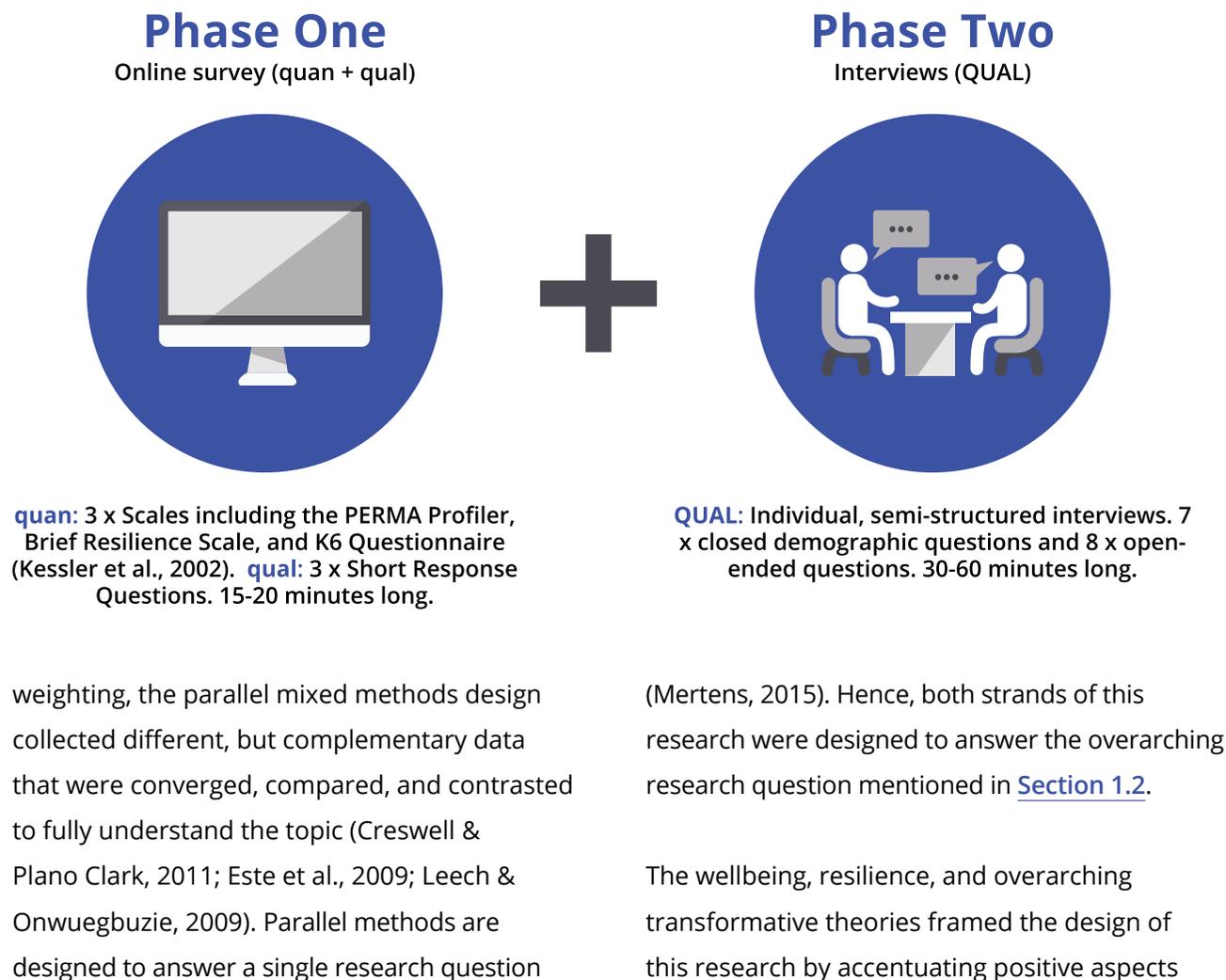
The research method for this research was designed to provide a wellbeing needs assessment of visual art students in Australian higher education ([Section 1.2](#)). To describe the current wellbeing of Australian visual art students, and explore ways to improve and sustain their wellbeing through higher

education, a multi-level approach (Dodge et al., 2012; Forgeard et al., 2011) was required. Such a multi-level approach was achieved through a parallel mixed methods design that converges two research strands: one mixed online survey (Survey Strand, [Section 3.5.4](#)) and semi-structured interviews (Interview Strand, [Section 3.5.5](#)) of the same sample of tertiary visual art students in Australia. This design is visualised in [Figure 3.2](#) and is described by using the following notation system (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Morse, 1991):

**(quan + qual) + QUAL = converge results**

This notation indicates that the Survey and Interview Strands do not have equal status (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Instead, the parallel enquiry prioritises (in capital letters) the collection of qualitative data in the second Interview Strand. This reflects the purpose of seeking deeper meaning and context through smaller samples (Yin, 2016). Through the contribution of this dominant qualitative

**Figure 3.2**  
*The Parallel Mixed Methods Design with Two Phases*



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of the research sample. By balancing questions to include both positive and negative aspects of the participants' experience (Mertens, 2003), this research revealed aspects of visual art students' study that could enhance their wellbeing during their degree. Wellbeing and resilience theories support the use of positive questions to focus on strengths in individuals and communities (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Seligman et al., 2009). However, understanding the level of risk posed to participants is still important for assessing resilience, given resilience occurs when participants experience stressors (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Therefore, the questions posed in the survey and interviews address the positive strengths of participants and their responses to the challenges they experienced, to seek a more contextualised understanding of their mental health, resilience and wellbeing. An account of these questions is provided in [Section 3.5.4](#) and [Section 3.5.5](#). See also [Appendix 1](#) and [Appendix 2](#) for a complete list of the survey and interview questions.

### 3.5.1: THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

This research used purposive sampling to seek information-rich data from participants. Given purposive sampling is used to select samples with rich information, it is not typically found in quantitative research (Etikan et al., 2015). However, it can be quite common in mixed methods designs (Kemper et al., 2003). This research prioritised qualitative data collection and the exploration of meaning in purposefully selected smaller samples (Yin, 2016). To purposefully select participants who experienced real-life events that best illuminate the research, a criterion was developed. This criterion ensured that only undergraduate students who were in different stages of completing an Australian visual art degree could participate. These students were recruited only if they studied visual art disciplines including:

1. fine arts (including painting, drawing, print, sculpture, ceramics, and/or textiles),
2. illustration and Design (including graphic and interactive, UX or UI design), and

3. digital art (including digital illustration and animation).

The sample scope for this research was determined by pragmatically seeking cost-effective ways to maximise participant representation (Kemper et al., 2003). For the Survey Strand, the target sample size was between 150 and 300 students to help manage the finite resources available for the research. The target sample size for the Interview Strand was 20-30 participants. Consequently, the smaller samples for each strand did not accurately represent the population of Australian visual art students (Department of Education and Training, 2018b). This inhibited the generalisation of quantitative data yet still contributed to the inference of mixed methods research that prioritised qualitative research.

The mixed data collection from the Survey Strand helped generate the qualitative interview sample (Fetters et al., 2013). Once students had completed the survey questions, they were

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directed to a separate and secure page where they were introduced to the Interview Strand and invited to leave their name and contact details to receive further information. This strategy provided students with an immediate opportunity to volunteer for interviews, thus reducing the time spent promoting the research to find additional interview participants. Furthermore, this strategy gave survey participants a space to share additional in-depth data soon after they completed the survey. This recruitment ensured that the survey and interview data were more directly comparable, given they were gathered from the same sample of students (Creswell et al., 2008). Although this staggered the pacing of strands, the research design provided flexibility, given parallel strands can occur in proximity to each other rather than at the same time (Mertens 2015).

### **3.5.2: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This research was built upon the ethical objective: do no harm to all involved in the research. The transformative paradigm takes this objective further by encouraging researchers

to prevent harm, empower, and respect the moral agency of those involved in the research (Hugman et al., 2011; Mertens, 2009a). This requires challenging oppressive social structures and recognising the ethical implications caused by power differences between the researcher and the researched (Biddle & Schafft, 2015). To design research that met these ethical objectives, the researcher sought advice from gatekeepers of visual art student communities ([Section 3.6](#)), counselling and psychology academics located in the researcher's host institution, research literature, and through professional development training like the Mental Health First Aid Course (Kitchener et al., 2010). Approval to conduct the research was provided by the James Cook University Higher Research Ethics Committee in May, 2018 ([Appendix 4](#)).

The research methods were designed with careful consideration of participants' wellbeing. Given the data collection involved the discussion of topics relevant to participants' mental health, there was a chance that involvement in the

research could cause distress. Therefore, data collection methods were designed to protect participants from any risk of harm or discomfort whenever possible. Visual art students were first provided with information about the research, including an explanation on the purpose of the research, what participants would be asked, and how data would be disseminated ([Appendix 3](#)). Consent was required from these students before they could participate in the research. To protect their privacy, survey participants completed the survey anonymously and interview participants were assured that any identifiable information would be kept confidential.

In anticipation of possible disclosure of harmful or intimate information (Creswell, 2014), protocol was established to help respectfully respond to participants who discussed distressing topics. During the interviews, participants were informed that the researcher was not qualified as a counsellor or psychologist. If participants referred to distressing topics, the research

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respectfully reminded them of the professional support services—including university counsellors—available for them if they felt they needed to talk to a qualified professional. Similarly, the survey participants were provided with the contact details of professional support services at the beginning and end of the survey to ensure they had access to help if they needed it ([Appendix 1](#)). The protocol provided a space for the researcher to debrief and seek professional support, if necessary. Debriefing occurred when the researcher required further reflection on multiple perspectives, or when they wanted to challenge their preconceptions when analysing data ([Section 4.2.1](#)).

The survey and interview questions were carefully designed to empower participants and prevent harm or discomfort. For example, the more positively associated scale items were arranged at the beginning of the survey to give participants time to first reflect on positive aspects of their wellbeing at university ([Appendix 1](#)). The first questions in the interviews asked

participants to focus on defining wellbeing and resilience before discussing examples where they or another art student thrived in their degree, despite the challenges they had faced ([Appendix 2](#)). Both the survey and interviews were designed to end with questions regarding the potential transformation of visual art students' degrees to benefit their wellbeing. This focus on social action aligned with the transformative paradigm, which seeks to represent the voices of the least powerful and empower them to seek change (Mertens, 2015).

### **3.5.3: PILOT TESTING**

Pilot testing can enhance the quality of questions asked and ensure that the questions have similar meaning for a majority of participants (Mertens, 2015). Some researchers rely on standardised data collection tools with the assumption that participants understand the wording of all items (Collins, 2003), yet errors can occur due to participants' cognitive burden or misunderstanding (Bowling, 2005). Pilot testing can enable vigorous reflection on how the data

collection protocols were ethically (Finlay, 2003b) and culturally sensitive to participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Testing is also valuable for researchers who use online methods to collect data, given content can often be viewed on multiple digital platforms (Reips, 2010). Subsequently, pilot or usability testing can help yield quality data that is reliable and valid (Collins, 2003) by examining if participants will experience online challenges such as low accessibility or ineffective format and design choices (Krantz & Reips, 2017; Reips, 2002).

For this research, the survey and interview questions were tested at multiple stages by members of the visual art and education community. The survey questions were tested over four rounds by a total of four undergraduate students, three art graduates, and two technical staff from a regional university in North Queensland, Australia. The interview questions were tested over three rounds by a total of eight undergraduate and two art graduates from the same university. This process

involved strategies that were similar to web usability testing (Krug, 2014), given the testers were asked to verbally describe their thought-process while they navigated through questions. Any comments or relevant visible reactions to questions were recorded and used to establish content validity and ease of cognitive processing (Bowling, 2005; Creswell, 2014). Specific changes made to the finalised online survey and interview designs are detailed in the following sections.

### 3.5.4: THE SURVEY STRAND (quan + qual)

The 15-20-minute online survey was designed to assess and describe the mental health and wellbeing needs of research participants. This self-administered, cross-sectional survey was designed to establish an understanding of participants' current wellbeing, resilience and psychological distress at only one point in time (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015). The survey included three scales: the PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016), The Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008), and the Self-Administered K6 scale (K6, Kessler et al.,

2002). To provide descriptive data that met the research objectives, the survey asked three short response questions (Section 3.5.4.4). The survey components are listed in Table 3.2 below.

This survey is described as a mixed questionnaire that includes closed and open questions (Johnson & Turner, 2003). In mixed methods research, the questions in different research strands can serve more than one purpose (Guest et al., 2012). The

open questions—otherwise called short response questions—were positioned at the end of the survey and hence at a time when participants had been thinking about their wellbeing and university experience. The first short response question was used to gather additional data that described participants' wellbeing, whereas the last two questions gathered data that could be directly compared with interview responses. The first two short response questions gave

**Table 3.2**

*Components of the Online Survey – a Mixed Questionnaire*

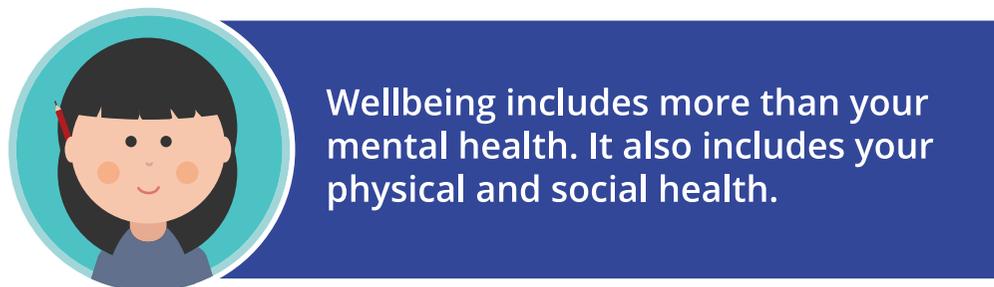
Online survey components	Items
Demographic questions	Seven closed and open questions
PERMA Profiler	18 closed questions (Butler & Kern, 2016)
K6 scale	Six closed questions (Kessler et al., 2002)
The Brief Resilience Scale	Six closed questions (Smith et al., 2008)
Short response questions	Three open questions

participants the opportunity to discuss topics such as their social worries and ways that they cope with challenges during their degree. The final short response question directly mirrored the overarching research question by asking participants to discuss the ways their degree could be changed to benefit their mental health and wellbeing ([Appendix 1](#)).

Using online surveys can provide a range of benefits and challenges for researchers. For example, online surveys can provide flexibility in formatting and they can be cost effective and easier for participants to complete over various computer or mobile platforms (Mertens, 2015; Wolfe, 2017). However, researchers express concerns regarding the high rates of participant dropout, multiple participant submissions, ethical issues, and general inadequacy of online research methods (Krantz & Reips, 2017; Mertens, 2015; Reips, 2002). Regardless of these challenges, many experienced researchers use online platforms to collect data (Krantz & Reips, 2017). Moreover, there is continued

**Figure 3.3**

*Visual Cue used in Online Survey*



advancement of internet-based research strategies to respond to these concerns, including formatting and design guidelines like the OIOS design strategy (Reips, 2010, p. 33).

To combat issues of participant dropout, this online survey was designed to be a more visually engaging experience for visual art students. The main visual cue provided for participants was the appearance of a 'cartoon version' of the researcher, which provided simply articulated insights or encouragement for participants as they progressed through the

survey. For example, one visual cue indicated that participants had reached over halfway in the survey, while another provided further information about wellbeing ([Figure 3.3](#)). During pilot testing, these visual cues were slightly altered to ensure they were received in a positive manner. In the final rounds of pilot testing, the visual cues were referred to by testers as reassuring and organised. The survey scales will be discussed next.

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### 3.5.4.1: SURVEY SCALE

#### – PERMA PROFILER

The PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) is a 23-item scale that describes participants' wellbeing. This measure was developed using multiple domains, including the five PERMA domains from wellbeing theory, to formulate a profile of participants' wellbeing (Adler & Seligman, 2016; Seligman, 2011). In this scale, participants were asked positively worded questions that incorporate hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, using an 11-point Likert scale, anchored by 0=extremely low and 10=extremely high. This measure has only recently been developed (Sun et al., 2018), and further evidence confirming the validity and internal consistency was provided after data were gathered (Bartholomaeus et al., 2020). Research literature provides sufficient evidence that the PERMA Profiler's internal consistency and validity is acceptable (Butler & Kern, 2016; Sun et al., 2018) and thus adopted for this research. However, recent research (Bartholomaeus et al., 2020) confirmed the low reliability of one subscale, the engagement

domain, and recommended that these domain results be interpreted with caution.

The PERMA Profiler includes 23 items split into multiple wellbeing domains: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, negative emotions, and physical health. For the majority of these domains, the scale allocates three items. An overall description of wellbeing is calculated using 16 items, whereas loneliness remains a single item. Although this scale is primarily positive in focus, it respects the importance of negative elements of wellbeing and uses both negative emotion and loneliness items to disrupt response tendencies (Butler & Kern, 2016).

To achieve cultural sensitivity and help participants relate to the PERMA Profiler, certain items in this PERMA Profiler were slightly altered. For example, the item "How much of the time do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your goals?" was changed to "In your visual art study, how often do you feel you are making progress towards your goals?" The

items were also arranged on separate pages according to feedback from pilot testers, who explained how certain questions were difficult to cognitively process unless they were displayed alone on a page that was separate to other questions. This clarified the context of items for participants and, as confirmed in the final rounds of pilot testing, the separated items were easier for participants to understand.

### 3.5.4.2: SURVEY SCALE

#### – SELF-ADMINISTERED K6

The Australian version of K6, a six-item non-specific distress scale, was used to measure participants' psychological distress (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Kessler et al., 2002). Given this research did not seek to identify compromised mental health in participants ([Section 1.2](#)), the more detailed assessment provided by the K10 scales was deemed unnecessary (Kessler et al., 2002). Instead, the K6 scale provided a suitable measurement that could be completed within two to three minutes (Kessler et al., 2002). This scale asked participants

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to consider the past thirty days and report how frequently they experienced symptoms including hopelessness, restlessness and depression. Participants responded by using a five-point Likert scale (1=none of the time and 5=all of the time). Research literature indicates that the K6 has high reliability and internal consistency (Peiper et al., 2016; Prochaska et al., 2012).

### **3.5.4.3: SURVEY SCALE – BRIEF RESILIENCE SCALE**

The research participants' ability to bounce back or recover from stress was measured using the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008). Participants were asked to respond to six items by using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree). Past studies have provided evidence of validity and good internal consistency for this scale (Bore et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2016). After reviewing nineteen resilience scales, Windle and colleagues (2011) identified the Brief Resilience Scale as one of three measures that provide the best psychometric ratings.

Like the PERMA Profiler, slight adjustments were made to the order of items in the Brief Resilience Scale. In this scale, three of the six items (question 1, 3 and 5) were worded positively and three (question 2, 4 and 6) were worded negatively. This can cause a wording effect that forms two factors (Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2016) and feedback provided in the pilot tests revealed that the order of the items was confusing for participants. Hence, the positively worded items were sorted onto a separate page before the negatively worded items, to increase a sense of flow and reduce the cognitive burden on participants (Bowling, 2005).

### **3.5.4.4: SURVEY SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS**

Participants were asked to answer three short response questions by using up to 15,000 characters per question ([Appendix 1](#)). This gave participants an opportunity to share data that were unrestrained by the survey (Johnson & Turner, 2003). The first question was closed but included prompts for a more detailed response.

Given research literature has indicated that visual art students can experience stress regarding power relationships during their education (Seton & Trouton, 2014), the first question sought to explore participants' social anxiety and their tendency to compare themselves with others (Larcombe & Fethers, 2013). The second and third short response questions were open ended for participants to further explore how they made sense of their educational experience (Creswell, 2003). The second question encouraged students to discuss their coping strategies. Finally, the third question asked for recommendations to enhance student wellbeing at university.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using short response questions in surveys. Short responses can be used to provide informative quotes that can embellish or validate survey findings, and identify emergent themes to assist with the analysis of interview data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). However, they do not serve as a complete qualitative data set (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and can result in vague answers

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(Johnson & Turner, 2003). With this in mind, it is ideal that the survey findings were converged with additional interview findings during analysis ([Section 4.4](#)), given the short response questions were similar to those asked in the interviews ([Section 3.5.5](#)). Consequently, the collected data are conducive to merging in analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Fetters et al., 2013).

Surveys and interviews rely on self-reported responses from participants (Mertens, 2015; Yin, 2016). Although self-reported behaviour can reveal important insights into participants' understanding (Yin, 2016), there is potential for contamination of data due to social desirability or memory bias (Diener et al., 2017; Forgeard et al., 2011). Participants may report their most salient and recent experiences rather than reporting from a long-term perspective (Forgeard et al., 2011). Under-reported, inaccurate or dishonest responses can also be amplified if the questions discuss sensitive topics (Jehn & Jonsen, 2010). Given this research explored wellbeing and mental health, it was possible that the bias

from data collected could be more or less tilted towards participants who desired a happier experience during their higher education (Lipson et al., 2016; Seligman et al., 2005). However, a mixed methods approach can counteract any threats to the accurate interpretation of data (Jehn & Jonsen, 2010).

### **3.5.5: THE INTERVIEW STRAND (QUAL)**

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted in this second strand to provide comparative insight into the survey findings. Interviewing is described by Fontana and Frey (2005, pp. 697-698) as one of the most powerful ways to “understand our fellow humans” and qualitative researchers view interviews as active interactions that lead to contextually based data (Yin, 2016). Semi-structured interviews, or qualitative interviews as described by Yin (2016), are conversational and flexible to changes because they are not strictly scripted. In this research, the 30-60-minute intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2006) were designed to gather rich, meaningful and contextual data regarding

visual art students' wellbeing needs during their Australian higher education. Additionally, the interviews were designed to elucidate ways to enhance students' wellbeing during their degree.

As previously discussed in [Section 3.5.1](#), the survey participants indicated their interest in volunteering to be interviewed by disclosing their contact details. Any identifying information provided by these respondents was kept strictly confidential. The students were next contacted via the email address they provided and were sent information about the interviews ([Appendix 3.1](#)). Once students consented to participate, the interviews were conducted either in person or using Skype or phone calls. Upon request, the interview participants could write their responses and return them via email. All other interviews were recorded using Voice Recorder, Open Broadcast Software (OBS), or Another Call Recorder (ACR) software. See [Chapter 4](#) for details on the transcription, checking and analysis procedure.

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A total of seven, demographic questions and eight open questions were included in the interview. These questions sought to reflect the transformative, wellbeing and resilience theoretical framework by positively addressing participant strengths as well as the challenges they experienced (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Seligman et al., 2009). The interview questions invited conversation regarding what wellbeing and resilience meant to the participant, the challenges that participants experienced during their degree, how they coped with these challenges, and how their mental health and wellbeing could be better supported and protected within a university setting. This aligned with the overarching purpose of the research. As discussed in [Section 3.5.3](#), the wording of interview questions was carefully chosen and pilot tested so they were easily understood by participants (Mertens, 2015).

During the semi-structured interview, steps were taken to respectfully engage participants in sharing their unique opinion. To more sensitively

explore participants' views (Mertens, 2015), the researcher deviated from the interview questions to facilitate a more collaborative relationship with the participant. The researcher redirected participants' attention by using key descriptive words to summarise their story (Ivey et al., 2017). This helped address any problems with verbal tracking and articulation while encouraging further participant clarification on the meaning of their story (Creswell, 2014; Ivey et al., 2017). Probing was used to prompt participants to expand on and emphasise the meaning of their story before the researcher continued with different questions (Yin, 2016). The researcher also sought to challenge any preconceptions about the interview by practising reflexivity ([Section 4.2.1](#)).

### **3.6: RESEARCH SAMPLE RECRUITMENT**

The recruitment of participants for this research required careful planning (Joseph et al., 2016). Given art students can be marginalised during their university education ([Section 2.4.1](#)) the researcher needed to consider participants' social and physical positioning, and their potential

vulnerability (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Initially, the researcher met with gatekeepers of visual art student communities—including artists, art educators, and other administrative staff—to help establish respectful and trusting relationships with participants (Egbo, 2005; Mertens, 2003). These interactions led to the development of highly visual promotional tools and use of an incentive to engage visual art students with the research, which will be further detailed in this section. Furthermore, the interactions provided a way of disclosing important information with gatekeepers (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) while allowing the gatekeepers to express their views on the research and maintain authentic involvement in the data collection process (Mertens, 2015). After giving consent, these gatekeepers' reactions and views on the research were collected (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

New media artwork was developed to effectively share information about the research across various online platforms. This artwork consisted of a 90-second animation (<https://youtu>.

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[be/a\\_BaLBelvmk](https://youtu.be/a_BaLBelvmk) and a 2-minute film (<https://youtu.be/M9WBq4UDIeY>) that was created by one new media art student and two graduates located in North Queensland, Australia. The creative process for developing this work included four reviews from the researcher and multiple testers, including art students and graduates in Australia (Siddins, 2018). The animation provided general information about the research, whereas the film incorporated both animation and footage of the researcher speaking about the survey. Both the animation and film were shared via Facebook, Twitter, email, websites, newsletters and journal articles.

Another tool used to promote this research and recruit participants was the research website ([www.wellartist.org](http://www.wellartist.org)). This website gave the research a stronger visual identity and described the research as a project called Visual Arts Wellbeing (VAW, see [Figure 3.4](#)). The website was designed in a simple, highly visual and friendly manner to help viewers feel comfortable and engaged with the content. During recruitment,

this website was regularly updated with blog posts relevant to the research. Art students and art educators commented on the design of the website, which suggested that it was effective in drawing attention to the research:

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“ ... the materials you have prepared to publicise and conduct your survey are impressive (Academic comment, used with permission). ”

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Although not strongly promoted to students, a prize incentive was also provided. This incentive was added to reduce dropout rates (Frick et al., 2001; Reips, 2002) and boost survey response rates (Cole et al., 2015) by balancing participants' risk with gain (Creswell, 2014). When they completed the survey, participants were able to enter a draw to win one of three Eckersley's Art & Craft gift cards valued at \$100, \$150, and \$250. The Eckersley's store was specifically chosen because it is an Australian online store that

sells products relevant to the research sample. Despite concerns of bias regarding students' quick completion of surveys to qualify for the reward, there is little evidence of incentives negatively influencing data quality (Cole et al., 2015).

**Figure 3.4**

*Logo of the Visual Arts Wellbeing (VAW) Research Project*



After planning and developing the promotional material for the research, participant recruitment began on August 6, 2018. First, information about the research and survey was shared with art communities through online platforms including

social media groups and electronic newsletters. Second, the gatekeepers were contacted directly by email. These gatekeepers were only contacted if they were affiliated with undergraduate visual art education and their email contact details were publicly available online. In total, 331 gatekeepers from 58 Australian universities, visual art organisations, and visual art communities were contacted. After four months, staff from 29 universities responded, indicating their interest and support for the research by sharing it with their students via email, Blackboard and Facebook platforms. Additionally, seven visual art communities in Australia—including The Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA) and the Design Institute of Australia (DIA)—responded and informed the researcher that they had shared the research invitation via social media, newsletters and national websites.

By February 2019, 276 survey responses were collected, and after data cleansing, 247 participants responses were kept for analysis. To ascertain how these survey participants were recruited, the

**Table 3.3**  
*How Participants were Recruited*

		N	%
Invitation type	Invitation from friend	5	2.0%
	Invitation from university staff	179	72.5%
	Invitation from university student	8	3.2%
	Social media post	33	13.4%
	Website wellartist.org	1	0.4%
	Newsletter	10	4.0%
	Other	11	4.5%
Total		247	100.0%

participants were asked how they found out about the survey. Responses to this question are detailed in [Table 3.3](#). Of the 247 participants who indicated how they were recruited, 11 described other ways that they were informed of the survey. Nine of these students were recruited through an email to their student email account, one participant found out about the survey through their university, and

another participant was informed about the survey through a Blackboard announcement.

The survey participants' expression of interest in the interviews and their contact details were recorded on a weekly basis. In total, 70 survey participants provided their contact details. These students were contacted via email and provided

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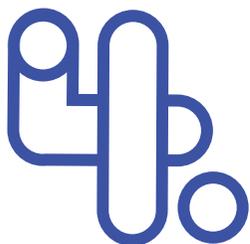
with information about the interviews, including the interview questions. Additionally, students were invited to reply if they were interested in being interviewed and to anticipate further correspondence to organise consent as well as the time and method for being interviewed. After sending through their signed consent forms, most interview participants ( $n=25$ ) chose to speak via phone, whereas three participants spoke using Skype and one participant wrote their answers.

After four months, most art disciplines in the research criterion were well represented by the interview participants, except those studying textiles, ceramics, and interactive media. To ensure that these visual disciplines were better represented, the researcher moved beyond thematic saturation (Farmer et al., 2006) and contacted specific gatekeepers to ask for their assistance in recruiting more students. Two of these gatekeepers sent through the email addresses of seven interactive media students, six of whom agreed to participate in the research. By December 2018, a total of 78 students

expressed interest in the interviews and 29 were interviewed. Further information about the research sample will be discussed in [Section 5.2](#).

### **3.7: CONCLUDING THE METHODOLOGY**

A range of methodological choices were applied to accommodate the complexities of researching a potentially marginalised sample. To better advocate for art students' wellbeing in Australian university education, this research adopted a transformative paradigm and parallel mixed methods approach that respectfully positioned participants as co-producers of the research recommendations ([Section 1.1](#)). The methodological framework discussed in this chapter was designed to facilitate social change, with the intent for the transformative paradigm to integrate all stages of the research, including the analysis and interpretation of data (Sweetman et al., 2010). Further integration of this theoretical framework into the analysis and interpretation of the collected data is detailed in the next chapter.



# ANALYSIS

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## 4.1: SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

Data analysis requires careful consideration of the various perspectives—including the participants, researcher, or readers—that can influence the meaning of the data (Mertens, 2009a). The analysis for this research was guided by the overarching research question ([Section 1.2](#)) and the methodological decisions identified in [Chapter 3](#). Initially, this chapter explains how the transformative, wellbeing, and resilience theories framed the analysis, with a focus on how reflexive practice guided multiple stages in the research ([Section 4.2](#)). Next, the chapter then refers to how the parallel mixed methods design influenced the analysis objectives and procedure ([Section 4.3](#)). The final sections of this chapter provide a detailed description of how the qualitative and quantitative data for each data set was analysed, merged, and interpreted.

## 4.2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When analysing data, researchers need to make analytical decisions—decisions that are often influenced by their belief system. Mertens

(2010) argues that researchers should clarify the underlying beliefs that influence their analysis by using critical self-reflection and explaining how their decisions reflect their paradigmatic stance. The analysis for this research was conducted with frequent reference to the transformative paradigm, including regular practice of reflexivity and critical reflection techniques ([Section 4.2.1](#)). The analysis proceeded with the awareness that certain research decisions can aid or hinder social justice, particularly if participant voices are inaccurately represented in literature (Liebenberg, 2009; Mertens, 2009a). Hence, an inductive analysis approach was prioritised for this research with initial, limited references to literature before deliberately introducing ideas derived from theory (Bazeley, 2013).

In transformative research, data analysis and the presentation of findings are designed to highlight power relationships and facilitate change (Sweetman et al., 2010). To adhere to this theoretical framework, ethical considerations of the participants' wellbeing were prominent

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throughout the analysis, particularly when interacting further with participants (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). The researcher sought to empower participants by identifying power inequalities during analysis and by honouring the diverse life experiences of participants through a multi-levelled interpretation of the findings, rather than reducing their perspectives to one understanding (Biddle & Schafft, 2015; Mertens, 2003, 2015). Furthermore, the researcher considered ways to enable participants to create their own change and further link the research findings to social action (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Mertens, 2015; Sparkes, 2001). Following the publication of this thesis, the research findings will also be disseminated through research publications and other highly visualised open-access reports that will be made accessible via the website, [www.wellartist.org](http://www.wellartist.org).

Wellbeing and resilience theories were used to frame the data analysis and interpretation, and to extend the potential for social justice (Mertens, 2009a, 2009b). Through the application

of wellbeing theory, the wellbeing domains were developed ([Section 4.4.2](#)) and presented to better inform the future design of intervention features (Adler & Seligman, 2016; Forgeard et al., 2011). This theory also provided a template to compare and disseminate the findings that are discussed in [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#) (Guest, et al., 2012; Mertens, 2015). A resilience metatheory was applied at various levels of analysis to address the ways that participants appraise and cope with different life events and challenges (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Masten, 2015). Both the wellbeing and resilience theories drove an appreciation and respect for how situational and multi-levelled participants' observed wellbeing features can be.

#### **4.2.1: REFLEXIVE PRACTICE**

Establishing credibility for this transformative research was essential, given its purpose was to provide a needs assessment that enabled social change (Sweetman et al., 2010). As explained by Birt and colleagues (2016, p. 1807), it is “imperative that alternative interpretations are reported” so readers can better judge how

transferrable the findings can be. Although the reflexive practices for this research were time-consuming, they enhanced interpretation by giving participants greater voice in the meaning of their unique stories (Arvay, 2003) which helped to capture complexities in the data (Gough, 2003). First, the researcher's [Preface](#), the pilot tests ([Section 3.5.3](#)), and member checking processes ([Appendix 5](#)) enabled scrutiny of the integrity of this research (Carlson, 2010; Finlay, 2003b; Thomas, 2017). Other analytical decisions were inspected through self-reflective journaling, interpretive summary documents, and—at various stage of analysis—interpretation checks with the interview participants and supervisors. These reflexivity practices are outlined below.

The research journal provided a way to unearth hidden social aspects of the research and critically challenge existing power inequities (Fook & Gardner, 2007). This journal helped the researcher consistently engage in internalised and ongoing dialogue about research interpretations and experiences (Finlay, 2003b).

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Additionally, the research journal served as a chronological record of the researcher's emotional reactions and how their thinking developed over time (Ballinger, 2003; Yin, 2016). These emotional reactions ranged from excitement to frustration, concern, or disinterest. Each emotion was critically reflected on with equal levels of caution, to mitigate potential validity-threatening bias (Biddle & Schafft, 2015; Yin, 2016). At times, personal and often difficult questions were journalled while imagining that research decisions were "critically examined by a variety of different people" (Ballinger, 2003, p. 68; Egbo, 2005). There was no intention to uncover reality through this practice (Gough, 2003), but rather to contemplate and reexamine the perspectives of the participants, researchers, art educators, and artists.

During the initial analysis and interpretation of interview data, reflexive practices were conducted using interpretive summary documents ([Appendix 7](#)). These documents, or forms, helped to assess the strengths and

weakness of each data item (Guest et al., 2012) and mitigate any interpretation concerns that were fundamentally about reflexivity (Arvay, 2003). The interpretive forms were completed for each data item in chronological order, with equal time allocated to every interview regardless of the emotions evoked when analysing. Each interpretive form required information about the rapport between the interviewer and participant (Finlay, 2003a), changes to the interviewer's conduct over time (Guest et al., 2012), silences and contradictions in the recorded dialogue (Arvay, 2003), and other aspects of data quality (Guest et al., 2012). Once completed, the forms were disclosed to the researcher's supervisors for checking.

The interpretive forms served to chronologically track coding notes (Guest et al., 2012) and write an interpretive summary (Doyle, 2007). The interpretive forms also led to the development of the first coding map ([Figure A1](#)) and individualised interview summaries ([Appendix 8](#)) that were used to create narrative boxes ([List of](#)

[Figures](#)). In transformative research, it is vital to involve members of the researched community in analysis and interpretation (Mertens, 2009a), although the level and length of involvement can vary (Mertens, 2010). To provide another way for direct involvement, the participants were invited to check their individualised interview summaries—consisting of three to five keywords and a narrative description of their interview ([Appendix 8](#)). The narrative description included three to four paragraphs detailing selected stories (Bazeley, 2013; Doyle, 2007) that linked to the overarching research question and objectives. Each summary was written in third person and used key phrases spoken by participants during their interview.

Various ethical considerations dictated the manner in which this stage of member checking was conducted ([Appendix 5](#)). With supervisors' assistance, the researcher re-checked all transcripts to identify any participants who might experience undue distress through repeated interactions with the research (Birt

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et al., 2016; Kornbluh, 2015). Consequently, three of the 29 interview participants did not receive further contact. To promote beneficence (Birt et al., 2016), the participant's identifying information was omitted from the summaries and pseudonyms were used (Carlson, 2010). To respect participants' time and prevent disengagement, no validation interviews were arranged (Kornbluh, 2015). Instead, each summary was written carefully to ensure that participants could understand the interpretation and easily reply with their comments (Carlson, 2010; Thomas, 2017). The participants were reminded that the purpose of the member checking was to verify how their opinions were represented, thus foregrounding these participants' voices in the research and inviting them to take further ownership of their stories (Arvay, 2003; Chase, 2017).

There were strengths and weakness to the member checking process. Fundamentally, every research interpretation is subject to revision because it reflects situational decisions that are

of a non-conclusive nature of understanding (Finlay, 2003b). The interview summaries filled a "space between raw data and published pieces" and provided an opportunity for participants to confirm, clarify, or alter how their opinions were represented—thus ensuring the researcher was not the sole interpreter of data (Chase, 2017, p. 2691). However, the lack of validation interviews could either mitigate the shared participant-researcher construction of their stories (Chase, 2017; Harvey, 2015) or help the participant maintain control over their story (Buchbinder, 2010). Member checking can thus establish credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and has the potential to reduce power differentials between the researcher and researched (Gough, 2003). Nevertheless, member checks can also be influenced by power issues, thus mitigating participants' opinions that challenge the researcher's interpretation (Finlay, 2003a; Kornbluh, 2015).

To destabilise the inescapable power imbalance between the researcher, participants, and

readers, reflexive commentaries were used when reporting the research findings (Gough, 2003). The purpose of these reflexive commentaries was to disrupt the authoritative voice of the main narrative by using self-criticism and a 'meta-reflexive voice' (Finlay, 2002, 2003a) that revealed the researcher's vulnerability and personal insights (Gough, 2003; Yin, 2016). Such reflexive strategies remind readers that interpretation never ceases and authoritative claims in the narrative should be challenged before readers consider the transferability of the findings (Birt et al., 2016; Quattrone, 2004). To prevent readers' irritation or disassociation with the meaning of the narrative, care was taken to use this second voice as a thought-provoking balance to authoritative claims (Finlay, 2003a; Gough, 2003).

### **4.3: MIXED METHODS ANALYSIS**

In transformative mixed methods designs, data analysis can involve multiple methods of systematic enquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Mertens, 2010). By adhering to the crystallisation metaphor (Hammersely, 2008;

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Mertens, 2009a), this research combined various analysis methods to create thick and complex interpretation (Denzin, 2012). These methods are outlined in [Section 4.4](#). Using mixed methods to analyse data can yield deeper engagement with social phenomena (Fielding, 2008) and present “a more complete picture of human behaviour and experience” (Morse, 2003, p. 189). This was ideal given the complexity of phenomena, such as wellbeing, studied in this research (Dodge et al., 2012).

Parallel mixed methods designs employ a separate analysis of quantitative and qualitative strands to answer research questions (Guest et al., 2012). This type of analysis is often more complex because both strands are analysed during a similar timeframe and then merged (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015). Comparing merged data can therefore be challenging, given the different data collection methods used in each strand can influence the detail of the data and extent that the findings meet the research objectives (Farmer

et al., 2006). To manage the complexity of data analysis for this research, the research purpose and design were habitually revisited for guidance (Guest et al., 2012). Examples of how the research methodology guided this analysis are provided below.

During analysis, the research objectives ([Section 1.2](#)) were utilised to discover how the quantitative and qualitative data converged or diverged (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This facilitated the **description** of participants’ wellbeing needs (first research objective) and **exploration** of their recommendations to enhance visual art students’ wellbeing during their education (second research objective). Given the quantitative survey data represent meaningful and descriptive indicators of participants’ wellbeing, psychological distress, and resilience ([Section 3.5.4](#)) these data were more directly comparable with specific qualitative data. Such qualitative data included the observable features of wellbeing, mental health, and resilience coded in the themes ([Section 4.4.2](#)). A comparison of the

qualitative and quantitative findings is outlined in [Section 6.3](#), after a description of how participants’ university experience impacted them.

#### 4.4: OVERVIEW OF THE ANALYSIS PROCESS

The comparative nature of this parallel research design required a highly methodological analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Applied thematic analysis was used to achieve such a methodological process (Guest et al., 2012). This type of analysis is a systematic and iterative approach that borrows the more useful analysis techniques derived from multiple theories and methodologies (Guest et al., 2012; Mackieson, Shlonsky, & Connolly, 2018). Applied thematic analysis is ideal for educating early career researchers on how to be transparent, rigorous and reflexive to ensure that their findings are credibly reported (Mackieson et al., 2018). Although this process is primarily inductive and used for qualitative analysis, it also applies basic quantitative techniques to achieve research objectives (Mackieson et al., 2018). The

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dominance of qualitative analytical methods was suitable for this research, given the qualitative data were prioritised and both research strands required qualitative analysis ([Section 3.5](#)).

As previously mentioned in [Section 4.3](#), parallel mixed methods designs allow separate analysis of data strands (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). However, this does not mean that the quantitative and qualitative findings should be presented parallel to each other, without genuine integration (Bryman, 2006). Bryman (2007, p. 8) argues that the reported findings “should be more than the sum of individual quantitative and qualitative parts”. To make the most of the quantitative and qualitative databases, the findings were thus meaningfully integrated through analysis and interpretation (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015) by using strategies suitable for single researchers (O’Cathain et al., 2010). These strategies align with the mixed methods design and the overarching convergence demonstrated in the research notation system ([Section 3.5](#)).

The data gathered through the Survey Strand (quan + qual) and the Interview Strand (QUAL) were first analysed separately and then merged. Additionally, the data gathered from the gatekeepers’ reactionary comments about the research ([Section 3.5.2](#)) were analysed and merged with other findings where applicable (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). After separately analysing all qualitative data from both strands, these data were merged by counting code frequency and integrating the results in a matrix display ([Section 4.4.2](#)). Next, the frequency counts, scores from survey scales, and quotes from qualitative data were converged using joint displays ([Section 4.4.3](#)). All tabular displays were woven into the main findings narrative—structured by qualitative themes—to ascertain any agreements, silences or dissonance between data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Fetters et al., 2013; O’Cathain et al., 2010).

The analysis for this research was achieved through a range of techniques conducted over three stages, which are elaborated in the next three sections. The first stage ([Section 4.4.1](#))

focused on the analysis of qualitative data to develop narrative themes. The second stage ([Section 4.4.2](#)) focussed on developing wellbeing domains and transforming the qualitative data into quantitative data, to be displayed in a matrix table. Finally, the third stage of analysis ([Section 4.4.3](#)) focussed on analysing quantitative survey data and merging the descriptive statistics—including scale scores—with all remaining quantitative and qualitative data.

#### **4.4.1: STAGE ONE – DEVELOPING THE NARRATIVE THEMES FROM THE QUALITATIVE DATA IN BOTH RESEARCH STRANDS**

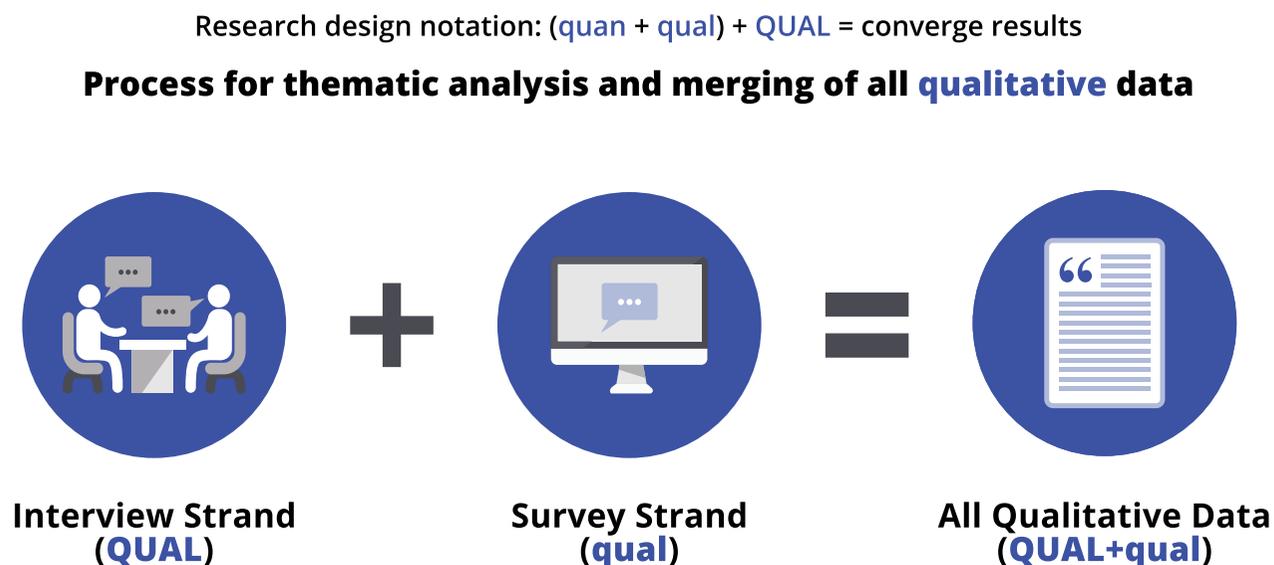
All data were gathered for both the survey and interview phases between August and December 2018. Analysis of this data began in December 2018, with a focus on the prioritised interview data (QUAL). Initially, the applied thematic analysis of this data was inductively approached using holistic coding (Saldaña, 2009) with a limited reading of research literature in the first stage of analysis (Bazeley, 2013). This approach

helped the researcher disengage from regular references to the 'loudest voices' in the scientific discourse that can undermine the effectiveness of inclusive and empowering research practices (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). After the interview data were analysed, the same approach was applied to the thematic analysis of the survey open response data (qual) before comparing the qualitative data from both strands. This process is visualised in [Figure 4.1](#).

Analysis of the interview data was underway while the remaining interviews were being conducted in late 2018. This analysis included the transcription of interview recordings using clean verbatim (Guest et al., 2013) and pre-coding (Saldaña, 2009) with Microsoft Word and NVivo (12 Plus). After the transcripts were completed, the accuracy of their represented meaning was checked using interpretive forms ([Appendix 7](#)) and member checking ([Appendix 5](#)). [Appendix 5](#) provides an in-depth description of how the interpretive forms and transcripts were developed, and the positive outcomes of the member checking.

**Figure 4.1**

*First Analysis Stage Visualised with the Method Design Notation*



Next, the transcripts were individually coded and the holistic codes were sorted into a coding map ([Figure A1](#); [Appendix 5](#); Saldaña, 2009). This coding map served as a helpful visual aid, yielding both a composite image of patterns in the data and a table of contents that was simplified as

coding progressed (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). A key question that guided this continued refinement was: **how relevant are the codes to the research objectives?** When the coding map reached an adequate representation of the qualitative data, it was subsequently used to

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develop a codebook ([Appendix 6](#)) that helped to clarify the sequential 'fit' of narrative themes.

[Table 4.1](#) lists the finalised narrative themes, meta-themes, and the brief definitions that are detailed in the codebook. To read additional information about how the coding map, coding themes, and codebook were developed during all stages of analysis, see [Appendix 5](#).

**Table 4.1***Narrative Themes Categorised by Research Objectives<sup>1</sup>*

Narrative themes	Meta-theme	Definition
Views on MH	Participants' experience at university	Opinions about wellbeing, mental health and resilience pertaining to the self, artists, students, and society in general.
University experience	Participants' experience at university	Overview of participants' general experience as a university student, including the structure of their education and how external stressors impacted their university experiences.
Staff relationships	Participants' experience at university	Participants' interactions with teaching, administrative and support staff that formed a part of their experience at university.
Peer relationships	Participants' experience at university	Participants' interactions with students from their cohort, students from different disciplines or students from different universities.
Time	Participants' experience at university	Participants' references to how they managed time as a university student.
Creative learning	Participants' experience at university	Participants' views on the differences and similarities between creative learning and learning in other study areas (e.g., engineering, law, business or science students).
Comparison	Participants' experience at university	When participants, university staff, peers, or an audience external to university made comments about participants' artwork.
Views on the future	Participants' experience at university	Participants' comments about their career trajectories and life after graduating from their degree.
Creative identity	Participants' experience at university	Any data that indicated participants' views on their identity as an artist or other peoples' views on artists.

Narrative themes	Meta-theme	Definition
Impacts on wellbeing	Participants' wellbeing including their mental health and resilience	Data exploring how the university experience can, or did, impact participants' wellbeing.
Views on coping	Participants' wellbeing including their mental health and resilience	The participants' broader references to coping with university challenges that did not specifically outline coping strategies.
Cognitive coping	Participants' wellbeing including their mental health and resilience	When participants used mental strategies and self-talk to cope with their university challenges.
Behavioural coping	Participants' wellbeing including their mental health and resilience	When participants took action and physically did something, other than seeking help from others, to cope with challenges.
Social coping	Participants' wellbeing including their mental health and resilience	When participants referred to social connectivity as a way for them to cope with their university challenges.
Views on change	Participants' recommendations for change	Participant comments on changing university education that were not specific recommendations and cannot be easily implemented into art education.
Department-wide change	Participants' recommendations for change	Specific recommendations that can benefit a larger body of students and staff in art departments.
Curricula change	Participants' recommendations for change	Specific recommendations to improve the way that visual art is taught and assessed.
Industry change	Participants' recommendations for change	Specific recommendations that focussed on participants understanding the creative industries and working in their chosen creative industry.

1. A thorough description of how the narrative themes and meta-themes were developed can be found in [Appendix 5](#).

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#### **4.4.1.1: MERGING THE QUALITATIVE DATA FROM BOTH RESEARCH STRANDS**

Comparing thematic data across different data sets deepen understanding of certain phenomena (Guest et al., 2012). Hence, the analysis of interview data was extended to the analysis of the qualitative survey data for comparison and to check if the narrative themes could accommodate both data sets. The qualitative survey data consisted of the written short responses to three open questions ([Section 3.5.4.4](#)). Of the 247 survey participants, 216 responded to the first question that explored students' social anxiety and their tendency to compare themselves with others (Larcombe & Fethers, 2013). A total of 217 participants responded to the second question that encouraged students to discuss their coping strategies. Finally, 210 participants responded to the third question about recommendations for change that can enhance student wellbeing in higher education.

These survey responses were coded and checked twice using Microsoft Word and then NVivo. For certain themes, participants' shorter responses (i.e., 'no' or 'yes') were not coded because they did not provide enough detail. During the coding process, only slight alterations to the narrative themes were required. A key alteration was the name of the theme Critiques, which was changed to Comparison to better represent how survey participants discussed other peoples' comparison or self-comparison of their artwork. The survey data added new insights into the narrative themes and often reflected the way that participants worried about their art and progress with the course. This new data was often in response to the first open question ([Section 3.5.4.4](#)) and may reflect how participants felt more comfortable describing less positive perspectives of their experience given their responses were anonymous (Iarossi, 2006; [Section 6.3](#)).

#### **4.4.2: STAGE TWO - DATA TRANSFORMATION BY DEVELOPING THE WELLBEING DOMAINS**

Stage two of analysis focussed on how the qualitative and quantitative data were integrated to establish a meaningful representation (Bryman, 2007). To ensure that the findings were presented as more than separately displayed quantitative and qualitative parts (Bryman, 2007), a strategy was developed to merge data during analysis by using both the interviews and survey short responses (Fetters et al., 2013). This strategy involved creating a visualised overview of both the qualitative and quantitative data landscape (Guest et al., 2012) and preserving the diverse perspectives of all research participants by conducting content analysis (Guetterman et al., 2015; Krippendorff, 2013). Content analysis can provide deeper engagement with data and increase understanding of the research findings (Krippendorff, 2013; Yin, 2016). To advance the analysis of this research, the

qualitative data was thus transformed into quantitative data by counting code frequency (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Guest et al., 2012). This process is visualised in [Figure 4.2](#).

Given the questions from both the Survey and Interview Strands were comparable ([Section 3.5.1](#)), the gathered data accommodated content analysis. By using content analysis, a meaningful comparison of data was achieved through the development of wellbeing feature themes, henceforth called *wellbeing domains* ([Section 4.4.2.1](#)). The content analysis yielded relative frequency counts that counted the number of participants who were coded in both a narrative theme and wellbeing domain (Guest, MacQueen, & Narney, 2012). These frequency counts were displayed in a matrix table that was split into two parts ([Table 5.5](#) and [Table 6.2](#)) and used to summarise the qualitative findings ([Section 5.10](#) and [Section 6.2.4](#)). Further information about this analysis stage, including a rationale for content analysis, development of the coding schema, and reliability checks can be found in [Appendix 5.2](#).

**Figure 4.2**

*Second Analysis Stage Visualised with the Method Design Notation*

Research design notation: (quan + qual) + QUAL = converge results

**Process for transforming qualitative data into quantitative data**



**4.4.2.1: DEVELOPING THE WELLBEING DOMAINS**

The wellbeing domains and values were created to cut across the findings from all data sets (O’Cathain et al., 2010). These domains were first established by referring to the theoretical

framework and scales chosen for this research (Neuendorf, 2017). As explained in [Section 3.5.4](#), the scales included in the survey were chosen to describe participants’ wellbeing, with a portion of the PERMA Profiler items specifically exploring the core wellbeing features

discussed in wellbeing theory: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Kern et al., 2015; Seligman, 2011). Other items in these scales identified additional features of wellbeing (Huppert & So, 2013; Seligman, 2011) including participants' physical health (Butler & Kern, 2016), psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2010), and resilience (Smith et al., 2008). These core and additional features of wellbeing were detailed in the research literature, subsequently assisting in the development of the wellbeing domains and values listed in [Table 4.2](#) below.

#### 4.4.3: STAGE THREE – ANALYSING THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY DATA AND MERGING WITH THE QUALITATIVE DATA

To enhance the value of this mixed methods research during analysis, all qualitative and quantitative data were integrated (Fetters et al., 2013). In this final stage of analysis, the quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis and then

**Figure 4.3**

*Third and Final Analysis Stage Visualised with the Method Design Notation*

Research design notation: (quan + qual) + QUAL = converge results  
**Process for analysing and merging all data (including frequency counts)**



**Survey Strand  
(quan)**

**All Qualitative Data  
(QUAL+qual) and  
Frequency Counts (quan)**

**All data (quan+  
qual)+(QUAL)**

combined with the results from the previous two stages of analysis. This was achieved by displaying the scale scores, wellbeing domain counts, and participant quotes from both research strands in two side-by-side joint

displays (Guetterman et al., 2015). The joint displays were then woven—with other tabular displays—into the main findings narrative in [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#) (Fetters et al., 2013). This process is visualised in [Figure 4.3](#).

**Table 4.2***Wellbeing Domains, Values, Definitions and Key References used to Inform Definitions<sup>1</sup>*

Wellbeing domains	Values	Domain definition	Key references <sup>2</sup>
Emotions	Pleasant and Unpleasant	Participants expressed how they felt or discussed experiences where they felt unpleasant or pleasant emotions	(Butler & Kern, 2016; Diener et al., 2010; Kessler et al., 2002; Seligman, 2011)
Engagement	Engagement and Disengagement	Participants described the process by which they completed a task	(Butler & Kern, 2016; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2014; Seligman, 2011)
Relationships	Supportive and Unsupportive	Participants mentioned their relationships with others and how they perceived these relationships or lack of relationships	(Butler & Kern, 2016; Seligman, 2011; Wagner, Gander, Proyer, & Ruch, 2019)
Meaning	Meaning and Low meaning	Participants referenced a sense of belonging or pursuit of something that they believed is bigger than themselves	(Butler & Kern, 2016; Seligman, 2011; Wagner et al., 2019)
Accomplishment	Accomplishment and Low accomplishment	Participants described the results of their completed tasks	(Butler & Kern, 2016; Forgeard et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011)
Physical health	Good and Poor	Participants discussed somatic symptoms that indicated their physical health	(Butler & Kern, 2016; Kessler et al., 2002)
Resilience	Resilience and Vulnerability <sup>3</sup>	Participants described or demonstrated how they bounced back from hard times	(Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Smith et al., 2013; Van Breda, 2018)
Self-esteem	Self-esteem and Low self-esteem	Participants mentioned their favourable or unfavourable self-competence and self-worth	(Huppert & So, 2013; Kernis, 2006; O'Sullivan, Hughes, Talbot, & Fuller, 2019)

**1.** A thorough description of how the wellbeing domains and values were developed can be found in [Appendix 5.2](#).

**2.** The coding schema and a comprehensive reference list of the literature used to define wellbeing domains and variables can be found in the codebook, see [Appendix 6](#). **3.** The value 'vulnerability' is used to help participants identify low levels of resilience. However, resilience and vulnerability are not antonyms of each other because they co-exist in everyone (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

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A descriptive statistical analysis of the survey quantitative data was conducted to further understand participants' wellbeing needs. The data were analysed primarily through SPSS software with occasional, brief returns to qualitative data in NVivo software to reflect on comments made by the survey participants. First, the data were checked for inconsistencies and incompleteness (Iarossi, 2006). If participants did not complete the first scale (the PERMA Profiler), their data was extracted from analysis. Of the 276 participants who began the survey, 29 did not complete this scale and thus their data were not included. After summarising participant demographics ([Section 5.2](#)), the mean and internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the PERMA Profiler, K6 scale, and Brief Resilience Scale findings were calculated. The mean and internal reliability of scale findings for survey participants ( $N=247$ ) are displayed in [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#).

The findings from the survey scales were next sorted into score categories. For the K6 scale, the dichotomous score categories were used to

identify what portion of the sample had *Probable mental ill-health*, or *No probable mental ill-health* (Kessler et al., 2010). The Brief Resilience Scale score categories—*Low resilience*, *Average resilience*, and *High resilience* (Smith et al., 2013)—were also computed and displayed in the findings. The PERMA Profiler, however, 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). Hence, the total survey samples' PERMA Profiler scores were compared with a validation sample (Butler & Kern, 2016) in [Table 5.6](#). This was appropriate given wellbeing is a multifaceted and fluid state; score groups that clearly define 'low' or 'high' wellbeing can become unhealthy labels that are fixed (P. Kern, personal communication, April 26, 2018).

#### **4.4.3.1: MERGING ALL DATA USING THE JOINT DISPLAYS**

In the final stage of analysis, the quantitative data were mixed with qualitative data through

two joint displays (Guetterman et al., 2015). Joint displays can merge multiple forms of data by comparing different information across dimensions like themes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For this research, a key link between qualitative and quantitative data were the wellbeing domains, that were considered as features of wellbeing (Huppert & So, 2013; Seligman, 2011). Subsequently, the two joint displays were developed to compare the findings from both data strands, using each wellbeing domain to highlight the diversity of participant perspectives while also detailing how the data diverged and converged (Guetterman et al., 2015). Both of the displays can be described as statistics-by-themes joint displays (Guetterman et al., 2015).

Visual joint displays are used to facilitate the integration of—and draw new insights from—qualitative and quantitative data (Guetterman et al., 2015). The first joint display ([Table 6.3](#) in [Section 6.3](#)) merged quantitative and qualitative data from the Survey Strand alone.

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This table visualised the survey scores alongside representative quotes to assess the coherence of the data (Fetters et al., 2013) and provide in-depth explorations of the diverse meaning represented in survey participant responses (Yin, 2016). Each row displays the total sample mean and the individual mean scores of the survey participants who wrote their accompanying representative quote. These rows categorised data according to the wellbeing domains identified earlier in the analysis ([Section 4.4.2](#)).

The second joint display ([Table 6.4](#) in [Section 6.3](#)) denotes the merged quantitative and qualitative data from both the survey and interviews. This table is similar to the convergence coding matrix of themes developed by Farmer et al. (2006), which displayed frequency counts accompanied by sample quotes. In the joint display for this research, the frequency counts for both survey and interview data were categorised by the wellbeing domain values and compared with representative

quotes. Consequently, the survey scale scores, survey short responses and interview data can be compared according to each wellbeing domain value, to draw the reader's attention to patterns or inconsistencies in the data (Guest et al., 2012; Guetterman et al., 2015).

When considering the display of frequency counts, it is important to remember that statistical comparison of qualitative data is limited (Guest et al., 2012). An absence of codes does not necessarily indicate significant findings, given there are infinite ways that participants could respond to questions (Guest et al., 2012; Keyes, 2002; Neuendorf, 2017). The frequency counts are therefore presented in the findings chapter primarily for descriptive comparison and should not be generalised to larger populations without careful consideration. However, when accompanied by the survey scores and representative quotes, these frequency counts do contribute to a more meaningful integration of mixed data (Guetterman et al., 2015).

## **4.5: CONCLUDING THE ANALYSIS BY DISCUSSING HOW THE FINDINGS WERE PRESENTED**

The analysis stages outlined in [Section 4.4](#) produced findings that represent an inductive and non-linear exploration of mixed data. Consequently, the mixed findings were displayed to further explore and compare the qualitative thematic findings ([Section 4.4.1](#)), a matrix table presentation of transformed qualitative findings ([Section 4.4.2](#)), and joint displays of all mixed findings ([Section 4.4.3.1](#)). There were sufficient compatibility and correspondence with the findings from all stages of analysis to enable their sequential 'fit' into the topics outlined by narrative themes and meta-themes ([Table 4.1](#), [Section 4.4.1](#)). Hence, the narrative themes were used as sections in the following two chapters, and all the tabular displays or figures that visualise these mixed findings are displayed alongside the main narrative within these sections.

All of the research data were gathered using a mixed methods design with a dominant

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qualitative status (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). These findings thus reflect the intertwining nature of discussions associated with visual art students' wellbeing and ways to enhance wellbeing during their education. The following two chapters present these findings as a conversation about visual art students' wellbeing. [Chapter 5](#) details findings relevant to the first narrative meta-theme ([Table 4.1](#)) by describing how visual art students' university experiences impact their wellbeing. The findings presented in [Chapter 6](#) address topics relevant to the remaining narrative meta-themes by focusing on how the visual art students' resilience impacts their wellbeing, and participants' perspectives on how to enhance student wellbeing during their art education.



# FINDINGS *How the Participants' University Experiences Impacted their Wellbeing*

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## 5.1: SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter—and [Chapter 6](#)—displays the research findings with an intent to empower those who participated in the research (Egbo, 2005). To affirm the diversity of participants (Mertens, 2009a), all findings are reported as a descriptive narrative that should not be extrapolated or generalised ([Section 4.4.3.1](#)). These findings do not focus on 'community deficits' but are respectfully discussed in appreciation of students' courage to share their stories and evoke change for themselves and their fellow art students (Mertens, 2009a). Contrary to more conventional reports of mixed findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), the quantitative results are not displayed first but are presented alongside qualitative findings—according to their relevance to the narrative themes.

In this chapter, the findings from both data strands are discussed globally, with references to any differences that were uncovered in participant experiences. While observing the

sequential order of the narrative themes, this chapter begins by outlining participants' diverse demographics and their perspectives on the research, creative education, and wellbeing ([Section 5.2](#)). The following sections describe participants' experience with university staff ([Section 5.3](#)), peers ([Section 5.4](#)), time-management ([Section 5.5](#)), creative learning ([Section 5.6](#)), comparison of artwork ([Section 5.7](#)), thoughts about their future ([Section 5.8](#)), and thoughts about art students' creative identity and practice ([Section 5.9](#)). To conclude this chapter, the consequential impacts of university experiences on participants' wellbeing will be introduced ([Section 5.10](#)) before addressing how participants' resilience influenced their wellbeing in [Chapter 6](#).

Throughout the presentation of these mixed findings, survey and interview participant comments are counted. Generally, when participants from a research sample are counted, this value is represented by 'n' (e.g.,  $n=12$ ). To provide a more specific indication of when both

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survey and interview participants from this research were counted, lowercase 's+i' will be used to represent the value instead (e.g., s+i=12 rather than n=12). Likewise, if only survey participants are counted, a lowercase 's' only will be used (e.g., s=3) with an uppercase 'S' used to indicate the entire survey sample (e.g., S=247). If only interview participants are counted, the value will be represented by 'i' (e.g., i=3) or 'I' representing the total interview sample (e.g., I=29).

*In these findings, I have written reflexive commentaries (Section 4.4.2.1). The commentaries are formatted in italics and will be written using a direct voice to address you, the reader. To destabilise the mostly depersonalised and passive voice of the main narrative, I have interrogated my interpretations of the data and position as a researcher (Finlay & Gough, 2003) by confessing my values and hidden agendas, and sharing additional observations. I have also endeavoured to shift between my position—as a researcher, teacher, artist, and art student—to ponder multiple perspectives.*

## 5.2: INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Both the survey and interview participants took part in the research between August and December 2018. These data were gathered at multiple stages throughout the university teaching period, with many survey participants (s=148) responding in August—thus situating the survey data either towards the beginning of the second semester or in the middle of the second trimester for many Australian universities (Universities Australia, 2020b). The interviews (I=29), however, were conducted later in the year with most of the data (i=27) collected between September and November. During their interviews, seventeen participants mentioned they were either busy with assessment, had recently submitted all their assessment, or had just received results from assessment for the teaching period.

The survey responses yielded a diversity of opinions, scores, and demographic information from a total of 247 participants. The most

common profile for survey respondents was that they were more likely to be female graphic design students who studied full-time. As can be seen in [Table 5.1](#) below, a majority of these participants (s=201) identified as female. Although more women are likely to enrol in creative courses, this sample (81.38%) exceeds the percentage of Australian female undergraduates enrolled in creative art courses at 64% (Department of Education and Training, 2018a). It is possible that such an overrepresentation in this research was because women are more likely to participate in mental health research (Smith et al., 2016).

*Even though other research literature could support my interpretation here, there is no absolute way to identify these students' motivations to participate. Anything from the word choice and design of the invitation, to the gender of the data collector (me), or the way the student was feeling on the day could influence their decision to participate.*

**Table 5.1***Survey Participant Demographics*

		N	%
Gender	Female	201	81.38%
	Male	36	14.57%
	Prefer not to say	3	1.21%
	Prefer to self-describe <sup>1</sup>	7	2.83%
	Gender total	247	100.00%
Age groups	15-17 years old	3	1.21%
	18-24 years old	170	68.83%
	25-34 years old	43	17.41%
	35-44 years old	12	4.86%
	45-54 years old	10	4.05%
	55-64 years old	8	3.24%
	65-74 years old	1	0.40%
	Age total	247	100.00%
Location in Australia	Australian Capital Territory	15	6.07%
	New South Wales	47	19.03%
	Queensland	68	27.53%
	South Australia	30	12.15%
	Tasmania	26	10.53%
	Victoria	44	17.81%
	Western Australia	17	6.88%
	Location total	247	100.00%
Mode of attendance	Full-time attendance	213	86.23%
	Part-time attendance	34	13.77%
	Attendance total	247	100.00%

1. Self-descriptions of gender included agender (s=1), androgynous/queer (s=1), ftm male (s=1), gender fluid (s=1), and non-binary (s=3).

**Table 5.2***Description of Survey Sample's Visual Art Disciplines*

Discipline	Primary are discipline		Secondary art discipline		
	N	%	Discipline	N	%
Animation	15	6.07%	Animation	10	4.05%
Ceramics	3	1.22%	Ceramics	6	2.43%
Digital illustration	9	3.64%	Digital Illustration	20	8.10%
Drawing	24	9.72%	Drawing	26	10.53%
Graphic design	85	34.41%	Graphic Design	17	6.88%
Interactive design	11	4.45%	Interactive Design	18	7.29%
Painting	29	11.74%	Painting	22	8.91%
Printmaking	19	7.69%	Printmaking	13	5.26%
Sculpture	9	3.64%	Sculpture	7	2.83%
Textiles	7	2.83%	Textiles	6	2.43%
Other <sup>1</sup>	36	14.58%	Other <sup>2</sup>	23	9.31%
			I don't have a secondary discipline	73	29.55%
			Missing	6	2.43%
<b>Total</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

**1.** Photography (s=7), Photography and video (s=1), Multidisciplinary (s=4), Haven't chosen major yet (s=1), Fine arts (s=2), Studio practice (s=1), Conceptual art (s=1), Interior, environmental and spatial design (s=3), Communication design (s=1), Product design (s=1), Game design (s=2), Electronic media (s=1), Film and television (s=1), Fashion (s=1), Art history (s=1), Multimedia journalism (s=1), Traditional illustration (s=2), Jewellery and metal smithing (s=2), Furniture (s=1), Glass (s=1) and Installation (s=1).

**2.** Photography (s=10), Illustration using various mediums (s=3), 3D and digital design (s=1), 3D and product design (s=1), art history and theory (s=1), new media (s=2), marketing (s=1), performance (s=1), fashion design (s=1) sound (s=1) and visual communications (s=1).

---

The age groups and mode of attendance selected by the survey sample were relative to the Australian university population. As displayed in [Table 5.1](#), a majority (68.83%) of the survey participants were between 18 and 24 years of age. This is similar to the 71.8% of enrolled Australian undergraduates in the same age group, as reported by the Department of Education and Training (2019). The data displayed in [Table 5.1](#) also show that a majority of participants (86.2%) were enrolled in their course full time, which is similar to the reported 76% of undergraduate students who also studied full time (Norton et al., 2018).

The survey participants were asked to select the primary and secondary art discipline they study ([Table 5.2](#)). A larger portion ( $n=85$ ) of these participants primarily studied graphic design, with 38 of these students indicating that they did not have a secondary discipline and 15 selecting interactive design as their secondary discipline. Such higher participation from design students may be due to the

dominant support from design organisations, communities, and educators who shared the survey within their networks ([Section 3.6](#)). The survey participants who selected 'Other' described their disciplines in either more specific or broader terms. These responses reflect the multiple art forms that art students can identify with (Daniel, 2016b) and, given the extent of crossover between art forms, this research does not report comparisons according to participant disciplines. Some responses indicated the participants' ineligibility for recruitment ([Section 3.5.1](#)). This criterion was essentially used to limit recruiting expenses, so—in line with purposive sampling objectives—additional data that provided unique perspectives were welcomed (Robinson, 2014).

*I had first considered sorting some of the survey participants' descriptions of their 'Other' disciplines into my pre-defined categories. I realised, however, that this would exclude participants' self-description and undermine the*

*way they view their practice—which is a key part of their creative identity. Instead, I have used participants' self-described disciplines when they are referenced in the findings.*

The visual art disciplines studied by survey participants ( $S=247$ ) were similar to those frequently practiced by interview participants ( $I=29$ ). Many interview participants ( $i=12$ ) identified primarily with design disciplines (including graphic, game, and interactive design), whereas other interview participants identified with different new media disciplines including animation and film ( $i=7$ ), or disciplines including ceramics, drawing, painting, printmaking, textiles and fashion ( $i=10$ ). To maintain the interview participants' confidentiality, each student chose or was given a pseudonym (if not indicated by the participant, see [Section 4.2.1](#)). These alias names are listed in [Table 5.3](#) by chronological order of interviews. In this thesis, participants are referred to by only their alias (e.g., Ava) or by survey ID name (e.g., SP 1) and primary discipline.

**Table 5.3***Chronological List of Participant Interviews, Participants' Pseudonym, and Discipline*

Chronological order	Participant's Pseudonym	Primary Discipline	Chronological order	Participant's Pseudonym	Primary Discipline
1st	Yasmin	New media	16th	Ella	Painting
2nd	Andrew	Painting	17th	Marylin	Printmaking
3rd	Louise	Graphic design	18th	Ava	Interactive design
4th	Gemma	Interior design	19th	Piper	Interactive design
5th	Anne	Painting	20th	Nicole	Interactive design
6th	Nick	New media	21st	Brendan	Interactive design
7th	Maddison	New media	22nd	Riley	Interactive design
8th	Owen	New media	23rd	Grace	Painting
9th	Dale	Animation	24th	Dylan	Interactive design
10th	Jasper	New media	25th	Kerry	Fashion
11th	James	Drawing	26th	Elisa	Interactive design
12th	Susan	Animation	27th	Mia	Interactive design
13th	Jane	Ceramics	28th	Caroline	Ceramics
14th	Leah	Design	29th	Tina	Painting
15th	Sophie	Animation			

---

The interview sample demographics are presented in [Table 5.4](#). This table indicates similarities between the demographics of the survey and interview participants, such as the higher percentage of participants who were female and studied full time. However, there are also differences. For example, there is a less balanced distribution of interview participant locations and a more balanced distribution of interview participant age groups. Over 50% of the interview participants were older than 25 years, with many ( $i=10$ ) in the 25-34 age group. This could indicate how mature aged students were more motivated to be interviewed, or as suggested by interview participant James, they felt more comfortable with discussing their wellbeing:

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“ ... the younger students might feel daunted or feel bad, you know, for actually getting on and talking about this stuff (James, drawing). ”

---

In late 2018, the researcher addressed an underrepresentation of students from certain disciplines by asking gatekeepers for recruiting assistance ([Section 3.6](#)). Two key gatekeepers who taught the underrepresented disciplines and assisted with further recruiting were located in Queensland. This additional recruitment process—and potentially the fact that the researcher also lives in Queensland—thus influenced the number of interview participants who were located there ([Table 5.4](#)). Despite different dialogues with gatekeepers situated in Australian Capital Territory, no visual art students from this territory were interviewed. One such gatekeeper explained that “there is no easy way to break into this space without some risk” of intrusion because, although the students “suffer from mental health issues,” they “have chosen art practice to avoid computer interactions” (Academic comment, used with permission).

*When writing this academic’s explanation, I felt conflicted about how I represented both the academic and their students. By sharing this*

*academic’s perspective, I could have reinforced a general misrepresentation of these art students as retrogressive, or even paranoid. However, by ‘suppressing’ these data, my silence could prevent opportunities for further realisation of these students’ wellbeing needs. It is up to you, the reader, to consider the varied reasons why these students avoided computer interactions—reasons that could include cybersafety, concern about being disrespected because of their marginalised points of view (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009), or simply preferences for more tangible, in-person experiences when discussing sensitive topics. After all, people have every right to feel defensive about disclosing personal information on digital formats.*

**Table 5.4***Interview Participant Demographics*

		N	%
Gender	Female	20	68.97%
	Male	8	27.59%
	Non-binary	1	3.45%
	Gender total	29	100.00%
Age groups	18-24 years old	13	44.83%
	25-34 years old	10	34.48%
	35-44 years old	1	3.45%
	45-54 years old	4	13.79%
	55-64 years old	1	3.45%
	Age total	29	100.00%
Location in Australia	Australian Capital Territory	0	0.00%
	New South Wales	4	13.79%
	Queensland	16	55.17%
	South Australia	1	3.45%
	Tasmania	1	3.45%
	Victoria	5	17.24%
	Western Australia	2	6.90%
	Location total	29	100.00%
University	Bond University	2	6.90%
	Curtin University	1	3.45%
	Griffith University	9	31.03%
	James Cook University	3	10.34%

		N	%
	JMC Academy	3	10.34%
	RMIT University	1	3.45%
	Swinburne University	1	3.45%
	University of Canberra	1	3.45%
	University of Melbourne	2	6.90%
	University of South Australia	1	3.45%
	USC Sunshine Coast	2	6.90%
	University of Western Australia	1	3.45%
	University of Tasmania	1	3.45%
	Western Sydney University	1	3.45%
	University total	29	100.00%
Year of enrolment	1st year	5	17.24%
	2nd year	15	51.72%
	3rd year	5	17.24%
	4th year (postgraduate)	3	10.34%
	5th year (postgraduate)	1	3.45%
	Year total	29	100.00%
Mode of attendance	Full-time attendance	23	79.31%
	Part-time attendance	6	20.69%
	Attendance total	29	100.00%

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### 5.2.1: THE PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON THE RESEARCH

In response to a direct question during their interviews, the participants ( $i=23$ ) explained why they chose to participate. During both the interviews and member checking ([Appendix 5](#)), 17 participants commented on how they valued the research topic, using words like 'important', 'relevant', and 'interesting'. These findings further indicated participant's desire to help their fellow art students ( $i=7$ ), help the researcher by adding value to their research ( $i=11$ ), express their opinions about mental health for art students ( $i=10$ ), or suggest areas of change in their education ( $i=3$ ).

*When considering how eleven interview participants wanted to help me, I wondered if they did so by viewing me as a fellow (albeit postgraduate) student. Could being positioned as a student have destabilised my more authoritative status during interviews? Despite my attempts to position myself on equal footing, it is unfortunately impossible to avoid inequality in*

*researcher-participant relationships (Gough, 2003; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009).*

Out of the 29 interview participants, four mentioned that they found the interview and interpretive summary helpful because they were able to "get things off their chest" (Marylin, printmaking) regarding how their degree influenced—and could enhance—their wellbeing:

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“ This is a great interview, I have never been able to talk about my crazy (Yasmin, new media).

It's been kind of therapeutic for me as well. I think because I don't really get much of an opportunity to give feedback or talk about the degree (Dylan, interactive design).

---

A range of gatekeepers ( $N=15$ ) from Australian universities and art organisations also shared their

perspectives on the research. These perspectives reflected the gatekeepers' awareness of stressors that influence visual art students' mental health ( $n=4$ ), the overarching decline of art courses in Australia ( $n=1$ ), and current approaches that they were implementing to support students' wellbeing ( $n=3$ ). These gatekeepers also expressed their support for the research ( $n=14$ ), using words similar to those expressed by interview participants, including 'interesting', 'important', 'relevant', 'topical', and 'timely'.

---

“ ... I see the development of resilient and proactive approaches to mental wellbeing as being of crucial importance (Academic comment, used with permission).

I sometimes wonder if I would have been more effective if I'd just set up a therapy shop for artists (Artist comment, used with permission).

---

## 5.2.2: THE PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AND WELLBEING

According to this research sample, university life has various positive and negative influences on students' wellbeing. This is demonstrated in the exemplar narrative box below ([Figure 5.1](#)). Some participants ( $s+i=45$ ) specifically described the positive outcomes of their time at university, including how creative learning gave them a sense of belonging, purpose, structure, creative freedom, and a chance to learn life skills. However, other survey and interview participants indicated that their wellbeing was negatively affected during their time as a student ([Section 5.10](#)), with one survey participant stating that wellbeing is becoming a "major issue" for university (SP 143, drawing). For example, some participants ( $s+i=30$ ) thought their wellbeing was negatively impacted because they felt confused or stressed about the unforeseen aspects of their university experience:

“ I feel like the parts of the course that were sold to us were fictional (SP 108, conceptual art).

The decline of art courses in Australia, previously mentioned by one gatekeeper ([Section 5.2.1](#)), also surfaced in survey and interview participant comments. Some participants ( $s+i=8$ ) discussed how their degree was being discontinued and many of their undergraduate peers experienced different levels of distress or disengagement as a result. Others ( $s+i=13$ ) referred to how a lack of funding or budget cuts made it difficult to navigate their training as future artists. Grace made this point by explaining how the competing agendas between her university and art department resulted in the neglect of art students. This tension was similarly discussed by participants ( $s+i=13$ ), who indirectly referred to how their university devalued their art department compared to those from other fields. Current literature relating to the

### *Figure 5.1 Narrative Box – How Ava's Varied University Experiences Impacted her Wellbeing*

Ava's past enrolment in different university courses helped her identify what type of learning engaged her. For example, Ava valued the university she was enrolled in at the time of her interview because it was smaller and had a stronger sense of community. She knew that people would notice if she chose not to attend class. When reflecting on her previous experiences at different universities with larger classes, Ava noticed that she was disengaged and spent less time on campus. Consequently, Ava missed opportunities to meet people and be involved in university life.

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Australian government's discipline-based reforms also support participants' responses ([Section 2.4.1](#)), detailing art students' limited access to mental health services, shops, social clubs, and university events.

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“ ... so much of the university is just channelled into filling the campus with beanbags and hammocks and shit while they won't even fix the leaks in our roof or give us a working sink (Grace, painting).  
... in regard to my university as a whole, art students don't get much attention (Tina, drawing). ”

---

Although this research specifically focussed on how university impacts art students' wellbeing, participants mentioned how external pressures influenced their wellbeing during their degree. Various work and financial pressures ( $s+i=27$ ), excessive travel times ( $s+i=5$ ), disability or

physical health issues ( $s+i=13$ ), and relationship challenges ( $s+i=29$ ) were either affected by—or conversely, affected—the participants' university demands. For example, some art students ( $s+i=4$ ) were expected to pay for their art supplies, which was particularly difficult for students who were struggling with limited finances (Orr & Shreeve, 2017):

---

“ I always wonder how much better I could have done with my art if I had the money to experiment further. I always feel restricted because of this, which plays on my mental health (SP 143, drawing). ”

I see a lot of students who also juggle full-time jobs. More times than not, something's got to give and it's often the student that suffers (SP 170, animation).

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### 5.2.3: THE PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON WELLBEING FOR ART STUDENTS

During their interviews, the participants ( $i=29$ ) were asked to describe wellbeing and resilience. In response to this question, Riley explained how wellbeing and resilience are particularly important because artists are likely to experience challenges as they work or are seeking work in the arts sector. Brendan, James and Sophie linked optimal wellbeing with enhanced creative thinking and productivity. When describing resilience, some interview participants ( $i=8$ ) mentioned that they had previously struggled with, or could improve, their own resilience and wellbeing:

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“ This [resilience] sometimes can be my downfall, particularly at uni, you can't be a perfectionist at every single task. Because you don't have the time. In saying that, I suppose you can be resilient enough to put in the best effort that you can and continue that (Dale, animation). ”

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*When I asked the interview participants how they described wellbeing and resilience, I could have destabilised the power of dominant scientific voices who have pre-established definitions (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Rather than adopting the participants' descriptions completely, I instead shared my own descriptions with them to foster a spirit of collaboration and ensure we were both 'on the same page' when we moved onto other questions. I discussed the benefits and challenges of my decision with my supervisors during different meetings, but in hindsight, I see my decision as a missed opportunity to reinforce participants' voices over my own. I am glad that the participants still shared opinions that exceeded my pre-established definitions.*

Both survey and interview participants addressed mental health topics regarding stigma, subjectivity, and relevance to their art education. For some ( $s+i=7$ ) mental health and help-seeking approaches were considered subjective and complex. Mental health difficulties, as 15 survey and interview participants indicated, are not

always mainstream and are still stigmatised in society. Indeed, some art students may feel scared or confused about their feelings when experiencing these problems and cannot speak without their experience being romanticised or stereotyped (SP 110, painting). Ways to combat stigma were thus critical for participants like Louise, who stressed that students need to feel comfortable about seeking help:

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“Mental health is still very much a taboo issue .... It can all too easily become something that is misrepresented and romanticised, especially in popular media, and providing a pathway to building trust with students that they can feel comfortable/safe enough to seek out any help continues to be difficult (Louise, graphic design).

---

There were mixed opinions regarding how often mental health was discussed in participants'

communities. Some participants ( $i=5$ ) openly shared stories about their mental health difficulties to dispel any stigma and encourage other people to reach out if they had similar experiences. Other participants ( $s+i=2$ ) viewed mental health as often overlooked by people compared to physical health. Contrary to this opinion, Brendan viewed mental health as an overused phrase. Brendan's description of mental health related to peoples' familiarity with mental health difficulties but could relate to one survey participant's "extremely concerning" observation of other students:

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“... they'll casually joke about wanting to die or kill themselves. Usually they don't apparently mean it but it is an extremely negative and damaging 'joke' and mentality to spread around with no sincerity behind it (SP 189, animation).

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*Here, my interpretation suggests that other art students feel so familiar with the topic of mental health that they refer to it flippantly or by using humour. This comes from my own observations of university students in class and on social media, but it does not invalidate the possibility of other perspectives. It is likely that Brendan viewed the overuse of the phrase 'mental health' as a positive change and in no way connected to this survey participant's concerning observation. However, students could use humour as a way to inadvertently seek help for suppressed mental health difficulties. It is also possible that students who joke about mental health difficulties do so to better manage their wellbeing or combat stigma (Hopgood, 2014; Willinger et al., 2017) and they may not understand the negative impact their humour could have on others.*

Although Brendan found that more people are open to listening about peoples' mental health concerns, he found that it was still hard for people to disclose their problems. This

point was often recognised in the comments of participants who were hesitant to seek help ([Section 6.2.3](#)) potentially because such disclosure would require the person to admit vulnerability, otherwise described as 'weakness' and being 'broken' ( $s+i=7$ ). Similar reasons have been identified in research about visual art practitioners (Mentally Healthy, 2020). Conversely, Jane resisted talking to her friends about her mental health to protect them from the negative emotions she felt. This desire to avoid 'burdening' others was also expressed by six survey participants. Similar help-seeking barriers are further explored in [Section 6.2](#).

### **5.3: THE PARTICIPANTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHING, ADMINISTRATIVE, AND SUPPORT STAFF AT UNIVERSITY**

University teachers, including lecturers and tutors, can play a central role in student learning (Baik et al., 2017; Orr & Shreeve, 2017;  $s+i=3$ ). However, the support that teachers provide

can be influenced by many different factors. Other participants ( $s+i=5$ ) raised issues about redundancy, financial restrictions, and high staff turnovers which resulted in their receiving an inconsistent quality of education:

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“ ... if they're anxious about their job, of course you're gonna pick up on that and you're gonna be anxious about your coursework (Andrew, painting).

... cutting the Creative Arts degree completely .... our teaching staff are also affected and they can only do so much. I have paid a lot of money to attend uni, and I am not getting the [educational] services I paid for (SP 250, digital media).

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The participants had varied perspectives on their teachers' responsibility to safeguard students from mental health difficulties. Some

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participants ( $s+i=12$ ) felt that their teachers did not care or understand how their wellbeing difficulties impacted their learning experience, or vice versa. One participant (SP 236, painting) raised this point when they discussed how their teachers neglected their paid duty to care. Other participants ( $s+i=12$ ), however, contemplated their own responsibility to seek help as students or commented on their teacher's role, workload, and time restrictions. Such opinions were shared by Brendan and one sessional teacher:

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“ ... this is ‘beyond my PayScale’ I’m afraid (Academic quote, used with permission).

They’ll be more than happy to help you if you approach them, but they are not going to approach you. I mean, it’s not really their job, but yeah, I don’t know (Brendan, interactive design).

---

*As an undergraduate student, there were times when I trusted my teacher would provide supportive advice to improve my learning experience. When I reached out to them, I did not know if they were responsible for supporting my wellbeing, but I expected that they would help me. As a teacher and researcher, I realise that I previously viewed my teachers as having more control over the matter than I did, partially because I lacked awareness of my teachers’ duty of care and had not yet recognised my own agency as a student.*

Various participants ( $s+i=26$ ) showed an appreciation for how their teachers practised inclusivity, respect, care, and understanding of students’ wellbeing challenges. For example, one survey participant (SP 204, graphic design) described how their teacher’s expressed sympathy was uplifting and made “a huge difference”. Participants ( $s+i=9$ ) similarly appreciated the support they received from teachers when they requested extensions or lenience for delayed submissions. For Jane and

Maddison, the speed and positive framing of feedback that they received from their teachers made them feel cared for.

Overall, most interview participants ( $i=27$ ) and many survey participants ( $s=47$ ) alluded to a positive encounter with their teachers that made them feel supported. Some of these participants ( $i=7$ ) observed how their teachers were supportive of students who had already demonstrated a commitment to their degree. In these cases, participants explained how it was important to take initiative and actively approach their teachers for further educational assistance, which was demonstrated by one participant after they were interviewed ([Figure 5.2](#)). Participants ( $s+i=12$ ) also described how less formal, friendlier relationships with academics influenced how they felt:

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“ It makes you feel like someone believes in you, I guess (Dylan, interactive design).

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### Figure 5.2

#### *Narrative Box – Tina’s Experience with Seeking her Teacher’s Feedback*

Tina was aware that she should invest more time into talking to her teachers, particularly when she experienced issues regarding unwanted or limited feedback. In the past, Tina had coped with these issues by complaining to her friends about it. But after her interview, Tina decided to actively seek further connection with her teachers by meeting with them outside of class hours. Tina noticed that this effort helped her feel a lot less stressed about her assessment. Nevertheless, Tina championed the benefits of smaller classes so that she and her peers did not need to compete for their teacher’s attention.

“ ... I think it humanizes you (Piper, interactive design).

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Although educators are not expected to resolve students’ wellbeing challenges (Baik et al., 2017), some participants reached out and received support from their teachers. Yasmin, for example, referred to a teacher as her ‘uni Mum’ who listened to Yasmin speak about her problems and provided support. In another example, Jane’s teachers helped her keep her mind active and encouraged her to channel her emotions into her creations as a therapeutic process. Susan also received advice from her teacher when she experienced university and home life challenges:

“ ... he was like, “It’s okay, it’s okay. There are times when it’s going to be a little bit tough but what we make of it is pretty much what we get out of it.” That’s so true (Susan, animation).

---

Not all participants had such positive interactions with their teachers ([Section 6.4.1](#)). Overall, 23 interview participants and 76 survey participants also raised concerns regarding their teachers’ organisation of class content and assessments, criticism of artwork, and interactions with students. Some of these participants (s+i=12) also referred to how their teachers caused discomfort or distress when they discussed sensitive topics or made unintentionally harmful jokes and comments. Ultimately, the participants (s+i=31) indicated a need for their teachers to be more approachable, understanding, and accommodating with regards to their learning and help-seeking processes.

“ I feel like the university staff, frankly don’t give a shit if you have mental health issues ... I didn’t realise broken bones were higher on the scale of an extension than someone’s wellbeing and potentially - their life. (SP 66, graphic design)

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*When considering these types of negative responses, I found myself more inclined to adopt the position of art student, rather than art teacher, in an effort to distance myself from any of these 'maligned' teachers. There were moments when participants outlined their teachers' behaviour by including actions or words that I had unknowingly used as a teacher. During these moments, I silently fluctuated between wanting to sympathise with or endear myself to the participant, or defend the teacher's position. I wondered if—when participants experienced this uncomfortable interaction with their teacher—they felt a similarly silent fluctuation between defending their position or sympathising with the teacher. Could students reshape their perspective to validate their teachers, given the power dynamics of professional teacher-student relationships?*

The interview and survey participant responses also yielded findings regarding support and administrative staff. Both Jasper and Grace spoke highly of their technicians who, despite being understaffed and under pressure, still provided

valuable practical and technical support. Another participant (SP 194, art history) spoke positively about her course coordinator, who openly assured students that the art department staff were there to support them. This supportive environment, however, was not experienced by all participants (Section 6.4.1):

“ The lack of consultation between the administration and student body causes us a lot of stress, as having appropriate facilities and human resources impacts on our work and stress levels (Grace, painting).

The participants (s+i=58) referred to a wide range of healthcare, financial and legal aid services available to them through their university. These services provided varying levels of support. For some participants (s+i=28), their university's support services were considered easy to access, 'very helpful',

'fantastic,' and 'awesome'. Such positive opinions are reflected in the exemplar narrative box below (Figure 5.3). However, other participants mentioned that they or their peers did not use the support services available at university

**Figure 5.3**  
**Narrative Box – Anne's Description of University Services**

As an active member of her university community, Anne was aware of the various services available to students. These career, counselling, and student services all contributed to what Anne described as a safe, tolerant, and inclusive learning environment. Anne particularly liked how art students and graduates were linked to industry through regular emailed updates about events and work opportunities. Consequently, Anne found that her university was doing as much as possible to support student wellbeing.

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( $s+i=32$ ). Additionally, some participants expressed challenging experiences with the available support services ( $s+i=12$ ) or indicated a need for the services to be improved ( $s+i=52$ ). These responses are outlined in [Section 6.4.1](#).

#### 5.4: THE PARTICIPANTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PEERS

The participants' peers also played a vital role in their education and influenced the way that they coped with university challenges. When referring to their fellow art students, participants' observations formed a rich and diverse picture of their art cohort, as demonstrated in [Figure 5.4](#) below. These descriptions ranged from practical and helpful to outgoing and friendly, [neurodivergent](#), or introverted and highly emotional. Additionally, these observations indicated art students' resilience, or limited demonstration of resilience. For example, some participant responses ( $s+i=10$ ) detailed narratives about students who were focussed and successful in their creative endeavours, despite the hardship they encountered:

“ They're thriving through their stuff even though they've gone through manipulative friends and drama (Owen, digital media).

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Other participants ( $s+i=10$ ), however, expressed concern regarding their peers' mental health and resilience. These participants often referred to their younger peers. For example, Louise noticed that the younger art students tended to experience [imposter phenomenon](#), which was identified in the survey participant comments ([Section 5.7](#)). Dale felt concerned about his younger peers' limited capacity to manage both failure and success. Similarly, Piper and James explained how sometimes their peers were easily offended or did not know how to push past their teacher's judgement of their work. Indeed, both Piper and Dale expressed frustration regarding their peers' lack of desire to improve, and their limited understanding of how their vulnerability to criticism could impact not only their future endeavours, but also their wellbeing.

“ ... if you grade resilience to like having it at a rate of five, which is the highest, I think I could rate their resilience at two or three. Which is quite bothering (Piper, interactive design).

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*While processing the perspectives of participants who are older than me, I needed to consider the power relations between different aged students, as well as those in student-teacher and participant-researcher relationships. Could my younger age blindside me from certain perspectives? Could the way the findings are presented reinforce an 'us-them' divide between age groups? Although more mature aged participants manifestly discussed their younger peers, I noticed that participants from both younger and older age groups shared similar challenges and benefits from their university experience. For example, both the oldest and some of the youngest interview participants discussed their struggles with time management ([Section 5.5](#)).*

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There were also times when participants ( $s+i=8$ ) described their peers as having undesirable opinions on the purpose of their degree. For example, seven interview participants expressed concerns about their peers, who harboured what they viewed as unrealistic expectations about securing a successful career, or who misunderstood their degree as easy and fun rather than being hard work. One survey participant (SP 9, printmaking) viewed his peers as “simply adding to the university’s wealth as opposed to being legitimate artists”. These peers’ ‘blasé’ perspective of their creative education sometimes impacted participants’ progress with their own learning and often led to difficult group work experiences.

Group assessment provided a variety of rewarding and challenging experiences for participants. Although some participants recognised that group assessment provided opportunities to develop their skills and make new friends ( $s+i=6$ ), the participants referred more frequently to negative group assessment

experiences ( $s+i=13$ ). These students explained how they were required to trust their valued grades with people they did not know, manage the work of their classmates, or contend with feeling excluded by student cliques. This impacted participants in various ways, as demonstrated in Riley and Mia’s comment below:

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“ ... it gave me more experience in a random, obtuse problem that I never thought I’d have to figure out (Riley, game design).

... I have a really crappy group for a group assignment and that sort of gets really, really stressful (Mia, interactive design).

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While some participants referred to their friendships with their peers ([Section 6.2.3](#)), cases of isolation and loneliness also emerged from participant responses ( $s+i=38$ ).

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**Figure 5.4**  
**Narrative Box – Caroline and Marylin’s Experience with their Peers**

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Caroline appreciated that her classmates were inclusive and proactive in lending a hand to students who needed help. In the past, Caroline’s peers helped install other students’ work when they were unable to attend class, or delivered work to students who were feeling unwell.

As a part-time student, Marylin sometimes felt like a stranger and collaboration often did not work for her. However, when she collaborated with someone who helped her get the best results out of her work, she found the process worthwhile. Talking to other students brought Marylin a sense of solidarity and confirmed her own thoughts about university experiences.

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Some examples of this are provided in [Figure 5.4](#) above. Making friends proved to be critical for some participants to thrive in their degree ( $s+i=5$ ). For other participants ( $s+i=19$ ), loneliness was a common experience since they felt more comfortable being alone, or because they found their age or the structure of their learning prevented closer bonding:

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“ My fellow students are either much older or straight out of school .... I don't fit in with them (SP 166, contemporary jewellery).

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Sadly, participants ( $s+i=4$ ) also raised issues of peer bullying. Two of these participants were mature aged students who described being socially ostracised, slandered, and bullied by younger students. Owen decided to withdraw from his degree because of the primarily passive-aggressive and manipulative peer relationships he had experienced. For Owen,

bullying was evident in his degree because an unhealthy adoption of teachers' art critiques led to peers' overt criticism of people. When discussing art critiques and comparison, many participants ( $s+i=63$ ) referred to how students compared their artwork with their peers. These comments will be explored further in [Section 5.7](#).

### 5.5: HOW TIME INFLUENCED THE PARTICIPANTS' WELLBEING

For many university students, time is an important factor that either enables or undermines students' daily functioning as they train to become professionals (Lee, 2019). When participants discussed their wellbeing at university, different narratives regarding visual art students' experiences with time pressures—and ways of managing these pressures—emerged. Few participants ( $s+i=4$ ) mentioned that they did not feel pressured by time restraints because they were studying part-time or had their classes scheduled at convenient times. The interview participants

( $i=22$ ) described their time pressures in more detail and in doing so, some ( $i=7$ ) revealed an awareness that their peers perceived and responded to time pressures differently. Despite these differences in perception, many participants ( $s+i=82$ ) referred to their university education as busy, intense, and fast-paced:

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“ ... it's just, uni, uni, uni, uni, uni, uni, uni all the time. It takes up—more [of] my brain space (Yasmin, new media).

Because everything's so, like [Riley snaps his fingers] you've just gotta keep going and going and going. (Riley, game design).

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Comments about time management abilities, or lack thereof, were often linked with participants' description of wellbeing. Time challenges prevented some participants and their peers ( $s+i=44$ ) from looking after

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themselves or enjoying their creation processes. For example, one survey participant (SP 1, graphic design) viewed themselves as very organised, but they worried “every single day” because the information about their assessments continuously changed, thus influencing the quality of their submissions. Another survey participant (SP 32, graphic design) felt like their time management will “always be ruined” by their mental health difficulties. These types of survey responses frequently (s=14) referred to the participant’s stress regarding the inability of their teachers to intersperse assessment deadlines:

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“ I find it difficult in my degree that the entirety of my art school assessment occurs at the end of the semester, with no security from earlier marks. The accumulation of stress at the end of the term is overwhelming (SP 118, printmaking).

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Despite time pressures, participants (s+i=37) indicated that they were able to cope by managing their workload ([Section 6.2.2](#)). Leah, for example, was able to manage two additional subjects, extracurricular programs, and work during her second teaching period to achieve positive outcomes. Dale used his experience with work and sports training to see university deadlines as inspiring greater effort and greater outcomes. Not all participants felt confident with their time management abilities, however. Some (s+i=21) spoke of their bad time management habits including procrastinating until the last minute, being unable to break projects down into smaller tasks, and being unable to motivate themselves because they felt less confident about their creative abilities ([Figure 5.5](#)). This lack of time management was expressed by survey and interview participants from different age groups.

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“ ... you just sit there for hours and hours on end when you’re being creative,

thinking, “Is this right? Is this wrong?” (Kerry, fashion).

I leave everything to last minute and there’s lots of tears and yelling and screaming and frustration and then I pull it all together and hand it all in! [Laughs] isn’t that what artists do? (Caroline, sculpture).

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*When I interpreted participants’ comments about time management, I needed to critically examine the value I placed on these data. I naturally liked and respected the interview participants who discussed their success with time management, because I shared common views and experiences with them. Because of this, I needed to scrutinise if I had unconsciously projected any of my values onto these participants during the interview. I also needed to question how I interpreted any data related to the interview participant’s ‘bad’ time-management habits. My interpretive forms ([Section 4.2.1, Appendix 7](#)) were often used to raise*

*these questions. It was helpful to remember that the frequency of participants' time-management habits was contextually influenced, and I cannot completely represent nor understand my participants' motivations no matter how detailed they were with describing their habits at the time.*

When asked to compare their experience as an art student with students from different study areas, some participants ( $i=5$ ) raised differences regarding time demands. For example, Tina said that her art projects “always go wrong at some point” and never seem to be completed on time, partially because it is difficult to gauge the length of time needed to learn new techniques and complete detailed work. Participants ( $s+i=12$ ) made this point when they referred to how long it takes to learn new software and creative skills while planning and creating a product. Also, four interview participants explained that the execution of strong creative solutions cannot be achieved with last-minute preparation—unlike assessment for other study areas (Figure 5.5). Maddison noticed that her art degree provided

frequent deadlines compared to the distant exam deadlines in her past science degree. She viewed these deadlines as an opportunity to prepare for the workforce:

“ I’m already thinking in my head [and] my teacher keeps repeating, in the real world of design, there’s lots of deadlines so now we’re just preparing you to develop that skill .... That’s like one of the biggest things I don’t like! [Laughs] (Maddison, new media).

## 5.6: THE PARTICIPANTS’ CREATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

This section describes distinct aspects of participants’ creative learning, including the ambiguity of creative assessment criteria and class content. Additionally, this section begins to explore participants’ comparisons between creative learning and learning in other study areas. When directly asked, three interview

### Figure 5.5 Narrative Box – Gemma’s Experience with Procrastination

In the past, Gemma had a habit of procrastinating until a deadline was close, then rushing to complete the assessment on time. This was particularly difficult for Gemma, who argued that art students need a lot of time to plan before delivering a final assessment worthy of good results—unlike business students who can successfully cram the night before an exam. Gemma placed a lot of importance on getting good grades and invested all her self-worth into these outcomes, which had previously led to procrastination and eventual burnout. After taking a break from university to recover, Gemma referred to the support of her psychologist and family to build up her resilience and she learnt how to motivate herself to get university work done without procrastinating.

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participants explained that it was difficult to comment on the differences between degrees and Elisa posited that all university students experience stress. Contrary to this opinion, Susan thought that art students had an easier experience than other students. Three interview participants also speculated that creative degrees might be similar to engineering. Regardless, different research participants raised relevant topics about creative learning that are outlined in the remaining sections of this chapter.

*By asking interview participants to compare their learning experience with other students from different study areas, I was able to draw out new information about art students' experiences during our semi-structured conversations. However, in doing so I projected my own expectations regarding differences between study areas. This decision potentially caused interference with data collection, but I am grateful for the diversity of perspectives shared by participants—perspectives that also*

*contradicted my own research assumptions, or highlighted the limitations of comparison when the voices of students from other study areas are silent.*

The participants' responses indirectly described how their art community impacted art students' perceptions of mental health. For example, Brendan speculated that it was easier for art students to talk about mental health issues because artists have more explorative and open-minded opinions regarding what is right and wrong, or weak and strong. This opinion was echoed by four other interview participants, with Mia suggesting it was because mental health is "a very, very prominent issue with art students." Some participant comments ( $s+i=19$ ) reflected this sentiment when they discussed how they supported each other or felt more understood and appreciated within their creative university community. Consequently, these participants expressed how they gained confidence in their creative self-expression and in various social settings.

When considering art students' mental health, other participants shared their opinions regarding creative challenges. These challenges included art students feeling "stuck in their own heads" (SP 248, painting) or being "very susceptible to reaching lower lows" (Riley, game design) than other students because they were continually immersed in emotion. Piper viewed artists' continued expression of emotions as particularly challenging for students who are ill-equipped to process negative feelings. The pressure of thinking creatively and producing original work 'out of thin air' was also challenging for some participants ( $s+i=13$ ) who contended with creative blocks:

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“ I think creativity is really misunderstood. If you're creative, if you're creating something from nothing, it's tough (Kerry, fashion). ”

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The outcomes of art degrees, according to some participants, can also be different from other university degrees. Ella and Marylin viewed their fine art degrees as difficult to fit within the typical structure of university because of the greater focus on personal development and lack of clearly defined career paths. When comparing his experience as a past engineering and programming student, Dylan highlighted how design employers or clients often prioritise portfolio outcomes over good grades (Haukka, 2011). Unfortunately, Dylan had limited opportunity to produce portfolio work from his art assessments. As the participants discussed, portfolio outcomes can take longer to achieve because art assessment is structured and graded differently (Section 5.5), with less focus on learning a fixed canon of knowledge, and more reliance on teachers' feedback (Section 5.7):

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“ While I was studying my first [healthcare] degree, it was just mainly collecting all the information, try to memorise it as much as

possible and then vomit it out (Nicole, interactive design).

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The subjective and ambiguous nature of creativity sometimes provided challenges for creative students during their education (s+i=37). Unlike more concrete and factual degrees, Sophie found creative learning outcomes to be reliant on each student's creativity. This resonated with participants (s+i=18) who found it difficult to understand what was expected of them or how they should be creative in the first place. Leah sometimes found the infinite ways to create work overwhelming and very different to other fields, such as business, where there is “a very obvious right or wrong”. This raised concerns for participants (s+i=18) regarding how teachers marked work with minimal bias.

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“ Art is not marked or judged by its capacity to be right or wrong, like maths. Art is judged by opinion and skill (SP 66, graphic design).

... his comments were that I should have been more 'expressive' with it, and gone further. Whereas in my painting class, I was complimented for being restrained and focusing on the emotion in my piece (Tina, drawing).

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*Of the 15 interview participants who found the ambiguity of their creative education difficult, three were in the first year and nine in the second year of their degree. This could suggest that participants were still adjusting to the uncomfortable beginning of incoherent and open-ended curricula (Sawyer, 2019) but it does not negate the perspectives of the remaining three participants who were in the latter stages of their degree.*

Art students highly value assessment feedback as a critical outcome of their learning (Mavri et al., 2020; Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Given the criteria for the participants' projects were sometimes cryptic or vague, and were often achieved through the

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student’s individual and self-regulated creative processes, these participants (s+i=21) relied on their teachers’ feedback and grades throughout the teaching period to determine how they were progressing. However, some participants (s+i=34) received consistently negative, limited, or inconsistent feedback or unhelpful advice that did not reflect their final grades. Despite the effort and time that some participants (s+i=48) invested in their work, they were unsure if their efforts were recognised by their assessors, or even if they were heading in the right direction to becoming employable artists. Further insights regarding teachers’ feedback and marking will be discussed next.

*While I presented these findings as art students’ experiences, I am aware that students from different study areas—like engineering, math, and science—can experience similar challenges. Sawyer (2019) presents a comprehensive comparison of students’ learning processes according to their study area.*

## 5.7: COMPARISON OF PARTICIPANTS’ ARTWORK

Given art was viewed by participants as subjective ([Section 5.6](#)), this section will explore how art students are judged or engage in self-judgment. The subjective nature of art bled into many aspects of participants’ creative learning, including the way their art was assessed. One survey participant (SP 51, drawing) explained that assessors often graded the student’s art by comparing their work with those in the rest of the class, which can drive students’ worry about the quality of their artwork and the artwork of others. This might be why another survey participant (SP 186, painting) described the arts as having greater “subconscious competitiveness” and other participants (s+i=9) specifically described their field as competitive.

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“Visual arts is very competitive, everyone sees your work whereas in another field, an essay for example is only seen by the marker (SP 197, ceramics).”

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Personal aspects of participants’ artwork also proved challenging when their work was being judged ([Section 5.9](#)). Some participants (s+i=23) incorporated aspects of their identity and life experience into their artwork. This made them feel self-conscious or confronted when others viewed or judged their art, given their work represents a “vulnerable extension” of their personality (SP 133, studio practice). This vulnerability impacted not just the art students’ views on their creative abilities, but in some cases (s+i=11), their sense of worth as a person. One participant (SP 185, drawing) demonstrated this when questioning their validity “as an artist and a human being,” and another (SP 65, interior architecture) when they felt worthless if their artwork did not reach their standards of perfection.

Many participants (s+i=62) compared their art with those produced by their peers or artists online. As a result of this comparison, participants felt uncomfortable or “trapped in a bubble of self-doubt” (SP 255, environmental

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and spatial design). This doubt often related to participants' capabilities and progress as training artists. Indeed, 110 survey participants said that they felt inferior, intimidated, or worried that other artists' work was of higher quality than theirs.

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“ Making visual art and putting it out there is like being naked in public [and] exposing all your flaws (SP 257, textiles).

The work I make to show is a direct reflection of my skills and who I am. I'd be numb if I did not care what people think (SP 234, drawing).

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When contending with the risk of being exposed to other people's criticism of their work, the survey participants (s=217) described various fears. For example, some survey participants worried that the criticism could uncover what they viewed as their faults, including their age (s=11); a lack in acceptable creative style (s=12);

limited creative talent or innovative thinking (s=21); limited understanding or intellectual capacity (s=17); an inability to convey complex, meaningful, useful or diverse ideas (s=30); limited technical or manual skills (s=28); or an inability to generally reach the standards of their viewers (s=122). Another survey participant (SP 148, graphic design) explained that they also felt insecure when they did not receive negative feedback because it could indicate that her audience harboured negative views but simply were not blunt enough to share them.

*When reporting findings that indicate participants' vulnerability, I felt conflicted. The findings reinforced the argument that art students have wellbeing needs, but reporting these needs could reinforce devaluing social preconceptions of art students (Section 2.4.1). I instinctively wanted to protect these participants from scrutiny yet understood that by withholding these narratives I would undermine students' efforts to voice their experiences, and thus mitigate the needs assessment. These more*

*negative findings do not promote participants' strengths, but their strengths still exist. For example, participants demonstrated an admirable level of persistence to train as artists despite the challenges they experienced.*

Not all survey participants were worried about other peoples' opinions of their art (s=65). Some participants (s=13) indicated that they were confident or happy with their creative outcomes. Others (s=14) felt reassured by the positive feedback and grades they had received, whereas 28 survey participants made sure to deter comparison by prioritising their own opinions of their art above others:

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“ I have learnt that even if someone can do something better than I, it doesn't devalue the effort and results that I have created. I must do it to make myself happy first. (SP 37, graphic design).

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Riley cautioned that not all self-comparison negatively influenced students but in fact motivated them to do better. This was the case for three survey participants, who admitted that they were both worried and felt inspired by their peers' 'better' work. Other participants (s=5) rationalised that their peers shared similar insecurities and that their work was simply different. Further insights about how both interview and survey participants used cognitive coping strategies are outlined in [Section 6.2.1](#).

Given participants' teachers have the power to pass or fail students, their opinions were often at the forefront of their minds (s+i=25). One participant (SP 218, drawing) cautioned that overt criticism of students' work without encouragement can motivate some, but undermine the confidence of others, thus impacting their potential. Others (s+i=12) found that their teachers allowed their personal preference for certain creative styles to influence their teaching, rather than

maintaining an open appreciation for creative diversity in their cohort.

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“ Teachers/professor are very biased towards what they like in the design and creative world .... Everyone is creative in their own way and different, and that shouldn't determine whether you get a pass or high distinction (SP 102, graphic design).

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Other participants shared stories about teachers who overrode students' different opinions in the classroom (Caroline, ceramics), demonstrated their own ideas by using the student's medium to work permanent and unwanted change directly onto the student's art (Tina, drawing), or provided unhelpful feedback on the student's submission without sufficiently sharing their expectations before submission:

“ [She] was like “It's just not very good, you should do something else.” .... I tried to show her my ideas a bit more and help her understand but she didn't really seem to get it (Sophie, 3D animation).

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Given the personal investment that participants had in their work, their teachers' negative feedback was sometimes interpreted as a personal attack. Three interview participants knew that their teacher's harsh feedback helped them rethink their goals and improve, but they much preferred if the feedback was more constructive and less intimidating. This perspective is demonstrated in the exemplar narrative box below ([Figure 5.6](#)). Andrew, however, preferred to adopt what Orr and Shreeve (2017) refer to as tough industry values, and emphasised that making teachers' critiques too relaxed would hinder student learning:

### Figure 5.6

#### Narrative box – Dylan’s Experience with Receiving Tough Criticism

At first, Dylan hated how one of his teachers publicly tore him and his team to shreds during a critique. However, Dylan and his peers decided to take the teacher’s tough love feedback and eventually developed a product that they were proud of. Through this process, Dylan learned to recognise his teacher’s dedication to their success and Dylan now views that assessment as one of the best he has done, even though the process first made him feel like he was being scolded and publicly shamed. Since Dylan grew accustomed to this teacher’s personality, he has thoroughly enjoyed a more casual teacher-student relationship with him.

“ I would probably rather learn it at uni than wait until I got out and then realise that I’d spent six years chasing a degree, but nobody is actually interested in my practice because it’s, you know, shit (Andrew, painting).

Indeed, some participants (s+i=9) prioritised constructive—over supportive and positive—feedback from their teachers. Anne purposefully sought feedback from many different people to “save from nepotism” and did not mind if her teacher’s comments were less diplomatic, as long as they were constructive. James valued more outspoken and blunt feedback because it helped him reflect on ways to improve. Although not always positive, this type of feedback generally outlined clear ways for these participants to grow as artists, thus benefitting their preparation for the future.

*I noticed that a lot of these responses were from interview participants who more frequently*

*referred to their academic accomplishments or their future career. Not all art students are enrolled for these purposes, however. Some participants, like Marilyn, were enrolled because they enjoyed creative learning—it improved their quality of life. As teachers, do we remember different student motivations when we offer feedback?*

### 5.8: HOW PARTICIPANTS VIEWED THEIR FUTURE AFTER GRADUATION

When discussing their future, participants shared their goals, excitement and concerns regarding their preparation for life after graduation. These views addressed how art degrees prepared students for their prospective careers, the challenges art students faced when seeking financial security in the creative industries, and participants’ plans to enter the workforce. Three interview participants specifically mentioned that they looked forward to finishing their degree. Unlike other participants, Yasmin’s desire to finish was fuelled by hope to regain her zest for life after graduation—which in turn could help her decide her future work trajectory:

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“ I might have some time to be like [claps hands]. The effects of uni have washed away! Now I'm just a person with a qualification! Go back to being sparky (Yasmin, new media).

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Different levels of confidence were expressed by participants when they discussed how their creative education prepared them for a future in creative production. For example, participants ( $s+i=3$ ) stated that the type of assessment and pacing of their degrees represented a real work environment. Other participants ( $i=5$ ) appreciated how they were able to explore different creative disciplines or learn a breadth of theory and practice before specialising in certain areas. Similarly, Mia and Riley enjoyed the chance to 'stretch their creative wings', particularly when exploring different creative solutions for their assessment. However, participants ( $s+i=15$ ) wondered about their degree's capacity to accurately prepare them for their ever-changing industry.

The participants highlighted certain challenges that they felt impeded their training as professional artists. For example, various participants ( $s+i=17$ ) expressed frustration regarding an imbalance of the theory and practice taught, which hindered their ability to create or develop important knowledge about art. Other participants ( $s+i=14$ ) specifically explained that certain subjects were irrelevant to their learning or restricted their progress. Likewise, some participants ( $s+i=26$ ) felt worried that they lacked the necessary experience, techniques, or manual skills to produce professional and noteworthy art, as outlined in the exemplar narrative box below ([Figure 5.7](#)). Issues regarding limited or independent technical training were raised by participants ( $s+i=12$ ), with six questioning why online tutorials were used to teach fundamental creative skills.

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“ I was like, “Oh my God, why do I even bother going to uni when I

can learn online” [laughs] (Nicole, interactive design).

I think that the lack of funding for and emphasis on art education in Australia, specifically in terms of technical skill is lacking. In turn, we are at a huge disadvantage to compete on a global scale with kids who have been learning to draw technically since they could walk (SP 83, animation).

Particular parts of my degree seem too beginner friendly .... the course content is too conceptual, and doesn't create a sense of learning or achievement (SP 99, graphic design).

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As previously mentioned in [Section 5.6](#), participants viewed creative degrees as misaligned with typical work structures. Hence, art student trajectories were considered undetermined and precarious with limited

### Figure 5.7

#### Narrative box – Leah’s experience with learning software skills

Although Leah had a mostly positive experience at uni, there were times when she felt frustrated and unsure of her creative skills. This was primarily because she was not taught how to use the software and there was no forewarning that she would need those skills for the degree. Although Leah’s teachers were responsive to her concerns and happy for her to submit traditional works, Leah felt resentment towards her degree because she chose to pay a lot of money to learn essential design software skills. Leah also questioned her right to call herself a designer, given her limited skillset, yet coped with this challenge by investing time in independent learning during university breaks to prepare for the next stage in her degree.

guidance to help students navigate their career pathway (s+i=27). One survey participant (SP 171, sculpture) believed that the lack of career-focused art curricula was because teachers—who were often also practitioners—similarly struggled with their careers and were “trying to figure it out with little guidance”. When considering the limited career guidance for students, Dylan said that he felt alone and unsupported by his university. Other participants (s+i=78) felt similarly unsupported or unsure about their ability to meet industry standards, particularly when they considered their peers’ directions with their degree or were asked about their plans:

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“ The inevitable and always present “so what are you going to do after?” (SP 244, printmaking).

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*As a sessional teacher and a student, I have felt uncertain about the future and am interested in discovering ways to better manage these*

*feelings. Although I have taken steps to represent all findings as equally valuable, my personal investment in the participant requests to better prepare for the workforce (Section 6.4.3) could have impacted the way they are presented.*

Being unable to determine what industry required of them can take a toll on art students’ wellbeing. Despite mentioning her academic achievements, Ava felt stressed about her future and Sophie felt “a bit terrified” about transitioning into her industry because she did not know what was expected of her. Andrew believed that the knowledge of precarity in the workforce propelled a lot of negative comparison and competitiveness amongst his peers, even though it encouraged some students to crystallise their vision for the future and work harder at their practice. For Nicole, the lack of clear job outcomes influenced her motivation:

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“ I don’t know what kind of job this degree will create ... when you don’t have a goal you really— it’s really,

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“ really hard to get you through [laughs]. Because you don't know where you're going and if what you're studying will equip you into the career in the future (Nicole, interactive design).

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These findings indicated that participants were aware and concerned about the limited creative positions available to financially support them ( $s+i=19$ ). Such concern was confirmed for one survey participant (SP 171, sculpture), who had been unable to secure a paid position in the arts and had returned to creative higher education to improve her skills. Participants ( $s+i=4$ ) also expressed frustration regarding how universities continued to train art students, despite limited teaching resources and the intensely competitive job market of the creative industries.

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“ ... they're getting more and more students, less and less class time, less and less teachers. (Andrew, painting).

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The only way things will get better is if the university stop trying to treat our degrees like business exploits .... Stop devaluing arts through universities. Stop devaluing education to increase profits (SP 247, painting).

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When discussing responses to questions about their future, the interview participants demonstrated different stages of planning and self-preparation. Marilyn indicated that her intentions were not to work after graduation, but perhaps to continue studying within her means. Other interview participants ( $i=10$ ) had not yet considered their future, but felt confident that they would be able to explore their future direction later in their degree. Although this confidence in their degree was potentially well placed, it could also align with one survey participant's perspective that most students were focussed on the “extreme stress” of making it to graduation rather than after graduation, which had negative consequences:

“ ... a bigger problem I notice is in my friends who have graduated. Their sense of loss of purpose after graduation is huge (SP 228, printmaking).

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Various participants ( $s+i=19$ ) outlined clear goals for their future. These plans indicated the participant's hope (Lindström, 2017) and determination to engage in postgraduate study, manage multiple jobs in different fields, start a business, launch a YouTube channel, and work hard on developing a high-quality portfolio. Other participants ( $s+i=19$ ) actively sought or were already engaged in tasks and events that exposed them to the industry. Such engagement included work experience, industry-related workshops, study tours, and conferences. Additionally, eight interview participants also referred to university-facilitated guest talks that exposed them to industry topics and practicing artists.

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Seeking out work experiences proved to be challenging for some participants ( $s+i=6$ ). Although desiring more exposure to industry, one survey and interview participant found it quite difficult to be accepted into an internship. Four interview participants mentioned feeling underprepared and intimidated by the prospect of work experience, and three interview participants planned to introduce themselves to industry members when they felt skilled enough to make an impression. The topic of networking was raised by 12 interview and survey participants. This topic was uncomfortable for six of these participants because they felt pressured to build social capital and “get ahead by who they know” (SP 171, sculpture). Further insights regarding art students’ exposure to industry will be explored in [Section 6.4.3](#).

## 5.9: THE PARTICIPANTS’ VIEWS ON CREATIVE IDENTITY AND PRACTICE

This section explores participants’ deeper connections with their art, the way they view themselves as artists, and their opinions on how

society views them. Essentially, these topics relate to participants’ views of their professional and creative identity—perspectives that ranged from a sense of wonder or pride in owning their creative individuality, to confusion about their identity given the complexity or breadth of their degree and their perceived lack in skill:

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“ I started accepting the fact that it’s true, I’m a designer. (Maddison, new media).

I’m technically a designer because I’m studying a design degree. But I don’t feel like I necessarily have the knowledge or skills to say that (Leah, design).

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The participants’ relationship with their art practice also varied. Some ( $s+i=43$ ) cherished their ability to self-express with their art and enjoyed a state of happiness or therapeutic benefit as they created. In addition to this motivation, some participants ( $s+i=16$ ) felt compelled to practice art

because it was the only thing they understood, the only way they could live the life they wished to lead, or the only way they felt they could meaningfully contribute to the world around them. Alternatively, one participant (SP 44<sup>[21]</sup>) questioned if they wanted to continue with their creative learning because they preferred “math-like solid data to design-like theories”.

These descriptions uncovered a complex tension between what participants viewed as important art practice versus therapeutic practice. For example, one participant (SP 181, painting) explained that there was a difference between students who “do art to express themselves to keep it together” and students who are “trying to break into the industry”. Other participants ( $s+i=4$ ) referred to artists who expressed a neoliberalist perspective that art was therapeutic alone—a perspective that consequently undermined the integrity and seriousness of art as a higher education discipline. James

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21. This participant had not chosen a major yet.

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referred to this perspective as being reinforced by amateur artists, but he still found art therapy valuable and envisioned how art practice can be used as a preventative measure:

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“ ... to build up mental resilience first, so they don't get broken. Rather than an after-effect (James, drawing).”

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Identity work is an essential part of each art student's university experience (Orr & Shreeve, 2017; Reid et al., 2019). As previously discussed in [Section 5.7](#), some participants ( $s+i=38$ ) heavily incorporated emotions and their sense of self into their art. This process was mentioned by Louise, who noticed how the structure of art education encouraged students to tie their identity into their work. Elisa raised this point when she discussed the challenge of creating work that both reflected her identity and met industry standards. Other participants ( $s=19$ ) explained how they felt restricted and unable to

define or truly express their identity because of their degree's structure, or because they knew their audience would not approve:

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“ I sometimes feel like I'm unable to make what I truly want to due to the expectations of a fickle and largely unappreciative audience (SP 237, graphic design).”

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Unique challenges emerged for participants who felt strongly engaged in the creation of their work. As discussed in [Section 5.6](#), art students can be frequently immersed in emotions and, as Piper and Owen explained, using their art to express unpleasant emotions can lead them to spiral down into an unhealthy 'pit' where they focus more on their problems. Although not always a negative experience, Grace found artists can be “sucked into a kind of whirlpool” where their creative concepts cannot be unseen:

“ If you're doing artwork that critiques a particular social system, and that particular social system is all around you constantly, then it can reinforce itself into your frame of mind to the point where you .... can't enjoy things (Grace, painting).”

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Other participants actively incorporated their mental health difficulties into their artwork. Tina referred to this as a fulfilling process—despite the multiple breakdowns she experienced—because her audience could see “the raw pain and emotions that artists put into our art”. Jane also used her sensitivity to negative emotions as a way to energise and inspire her creation of more detailed and intense work. However, Jane found it hard to disengage from these negative emotions when she participated in other aspects of her life:

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“ If I .... always keep happy and positive maybe my work will be boring (Jane, ceramics).

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*When conducting this research, I was consistently made aware of own my personal inclination to prioritise students' wellbeing over their creative output. I therefore found these participant narratives uncomfortable to process. However, I am aware that my art practice is not as immediate or integral to my way of life— compared to my focus on creative teaching and research. This could relate to my 'balancing' workloads during my degree, yet it is possible that if I incorporated my sense of purpose into my art practice more, I would be more invested in giving other negative and positive aspects of myself to the creative process.*

The participants also described how unpredictable their creative productivity was and how this influenced their self-esteem. Anne viewed the experience as a rollercoaster ride between

feeling “the best” and being in the zone or feeling “extremely unsure of yourself” and not being able to work. Three survey participants described how they teetered between feeling depressed, ‘crippling’ insecurity, self-assurance, or disdain towards other artists’ work. Yasmin explained that at times she needed to take drugs to reboot, which could help her produce great work or work that she could grow with. However, at other times Yasmin’s self-talk was quite negative:

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“ Okay [Yasmin], brainstorming. Let’s just do a little bit of your assignment while your brain isn’t aching and telling you how much you fucking suck. Because you’ve got creating to do (Yasmin, new media).

---

*During member checking of her transcript, Yasmin commented on how her perspective on life “wasn’t great” at the time we had our interview. This was a good reminder to me*

*that wellbeing is multifaceted and dynamic. The duration and intensity of emotions that participants experienced can vary over time and it is important for any wellbeing interventions to accommodate the unique and complex wellbeing of different students.*

While some participants professed the value of their art, they were also aware that the rest of the world did not always feel the same way ( $s+i=32$ ). In some cases, participants ( $i=8$ ) believed that people were ill-informed, misunderstood what artists do, and needed to be educated. However, one survey participant (SP 47, interior environments) stated that even artists working in the industry were more concerned with financial gain than valuing the impact of their art. When asked about artist stereotypes, the interview participants provided varied responses. Dale described artists stereotypes as shrinking. James, however, spoke of the time he invested in reassuring other people that he was not an ‘atypical bohemian’ but worked long, hard hours:

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“ And they go, “Oh, that actually sounds like hard work.” It is hard work! You know? That sort of gains a bit of credibility in their eyes (James, drawing).

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James and Grace found that amateur artists reinforced certain stereotypes because they did not take their practice seriously. Conversely, Ella and Piper thought that some students adopted artist stereotypes so they would be taken more seriously. Both survey and interview participants (s+i=22) referred to social preconceptions by using words like 'lazy', 'disorganised', 'directionless', 'weird', 'dumb', 'depressed', and 'angry'.

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“ ... if you were a kid like me and you did drama and music and art and stuff you were expected to go nowhere because, “Oh, drama is so easy, art is so easy.” And you're like, “Ha, no. It's not. You give it a go if you think it's so easy.” (Mia, interactive design).

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Such societal views, as one survey participant (SP 110, painting) explained, could establish help-seeking barriers. These social preconceptions also influenced participants' expectations for their future. Indeed, participants (s+i=20) described an overall underestimation of value in art careers, with one survey participant explaining that art students are “constantly told by society” that they “won't make it” (SP 4, graphic design). Several participants (s+i=6) referred to experiences where they or their peers had to explain their career choice to unsupportive family and friends.

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“ I'm exhausted just at the thought of spending the rest of my life defending my right to make art (SP 215, painting).

I've got a friend whose Mum .... She was legit, like, “You can work at Maccas or push trolleys and still be more successful in your future than you are by pursuing this art degree.” (Yasmin, new media).

I don't think there's a lot of people working office jobs that have to go to work every day and have a bunch of people commenting that what they do is not valuable and what they do has no purpose in society. (Grace, painting).

---

On a more positive note, Tina identified a social preconception that artists were more liberal and open-minded ([Section 5.6](#)). Other participants (s+i=19) referred to how their art community had a more accepting and supportive mentality that at times enabled conversation about ethics and diversity. Such conversations helped participants feel more supported and comfortable with expressing their creative individuality. As a result, these conversations positively impacted participants' wellbeing as they experienced university life.

*There were times where I directly asked interview participants about the social perceptions of artists. This happened because*

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*a participant from one of the first interviews mentioned the topic without prompting, and their opinions reinforced my research on how devaluing social preconceptions can negatively influence artists (Siddins, 2018). I was interested in the interview participant's different perspectives. However, by asking the question, I projected my own assumption that social preconceptions can influence art students' wellbeing. I am relieved that, despite this research anomaly, the participants provided a variety of responses including opinions that contradicted my expectations.*

## **5.10: CONSEQUENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE PARTICIPANTS' WELLBEING**

The previous sections have described what the research participants experienced as they continued with their visual art education at university. To summarise this description, the following section will explore how these experiences have positively and negatively impacted the participants' wellbeing. Integrated qualitative and quantitative data from the

survey and interviews are used to provide a new perspective on visual art students' experiences at university ([Section 4.4.2](#)). Participants' qualitative responses, a matrix table displaying relevant frequency counts, and the quantitative survey scale scores for the PERMA Profiler and K6 scales are thus displayed in this section.

The matrix below ([Table 5.5](#)) displays the relative frequency of participants who were coded in narrative themes and wellbeing domains ([Section 4.4.2](#)). These frequency counts included qualitative data from both Interview and Survey Strands of research. Although providing a limited statistical comparison ([Section 4.4.3.1](#)), this display explains how frequently participants' university experiences (the narrative themes displayed on axis 0) aligned with the wellbeing domains (axis 1). The first rows in [Table 5.5](#) address the topics discussed earlier in this chapter, whereas the final row (*Impacts* theme) visualises when these distinct university experiences impacted the participants' wellbeing. For the remainder of

this section, the *Impacts* theme will be discussed further, along with other patterns and highlights from the merged findings.

This matrix visualises various positive experiences that have been drawn from the qualitative data. For example, when comparing the *Engagement* domain variables, more participants discussed higher levels of *Engagement* across all rows, with higher counts in the *Creative learning* and *Impacts* theme. Participants spoke about their interest in learning the content and how the university gave them the opportunity to further enjoy creating. Likewise, a larger portion of participants discussed how they had learned to use time management and goal setting to cope with university challenges. These discussions contributed to both the *Accomplishment* and *Resilience* variables in the *Time* narrative theme, with interview and survey participants counted more often in each domain value.

**Table 5.5***Matrix Table Comparing the Frequency of Wellbeing Domains and Narrative Themes Detailing the Participants' Experience*

Domain/theme	Emotion		Engagement		Relationships		Meaning		Accomplishment		Physical health		Resilience		Self-Esteem	
Domain/theme variables	Pe <sup>1</sup>	Ue <sup>2</sup>	E <sup>3</sup>	De <sup>4</sup>	Sr <sup>5</sup>	Ur <sup>6</sup>	M <sup>7</sup>	Lm <sup>8</sup>	A <sup>9</sup>	La <sup>10</sup>	H <sup>11</sup>	Ph <sup>12</sup>	Res <sup>13</sup>	Vuln <sup>14</sup>	Est <sup>15</sup>	PEs <sup>16</sup>
University experience	10	42	13	7	14	21	7	2	12	14	2	9	13	9	4	6
Staff relationships	10	24	6	5	<b>42</b> <sup>17</sup>	41	1	0	11	5	0	0	10	7	8	3
Peer relationships	7	17	2	2	16	28	3	1	8	3	0	1	8	4	1	10
Time	4	24	8	6	3	4	0	4	<b>24</b> <sup>17</sup>	18	0	5	<b>30</b> <sup>17</sup>	10	1	5
Creative learning	8	30	<b>15</b> <sup>17</sup>	8	9	10	6	1	8	23	0	0	3	5	4	14
Comparisons	16	<b>86</b> <sup>17</sup>	7	2	19	18	16	6	14	<b>38</b> <sup>17</sup>	0	2	11	21	14	<b>82</b> <sup>17</sup>
Views on the future	5	42	8	3	2	15	13	8	13	23	0	0	5	7	1	22
Creative identity	11	31	13	3	13	21	<b>23</b> <sup>17</sup>	5	5	10	0	1	8	13	12	14
Impacts on wellbeing	34	<b>147</b> <sup>17</sup>	27	26	47	<b>90</b> <sup>17</sup>	29	15	33	76	4	29	41	95	23	98

**1.** Pleasant emotion. **2.** Unpleasant emotion. **3.** Engagement. **4.** Disengagement. **5.** Supportive relationship. **6.** Unsupportive relationship **7.** Meaning. **8.** Low meaning. **9.** Accomplishment **10.** Low accomplishment. **11.** Health. **12.** Poor health. **13.** Resilience. **14.** Vulnerability. **15.** Self-esteem. **16.** Poor Self-esteem. **17.** These frequency counts are outlined further in the chapter.

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“ This semester I’m prioritising keeping abreast with journal work and not leaving everything to the last minute (SP 119, sculpture).

... my experience at uni so far has helped me learn things about myself that I didn’t really know before. (Elisa, interactive design).

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*A lot of the content in this Section serves as a summary of the descriptive findings. As the reader, please note that my interpretation of the matrix table findings and the exemplar quotes displayed are not exhaustive. There is always data that I—and indeed, all researchers—have chosen not to write about. For example, I have not elaborated on the ways that participants learned time management, or the critical moments when some participants (i=3) had to repeat subjects because of their challenges with time management—data that was counted in the Time theme and Low accomplishment domain variable.*

Most interview participants (i=28) and 14 survey participants mentioned a supportive relationship when they spoke about their university staff. These participants referred to their teaching staff more frequently, and the interview participants were more likely to share detailed stories about their positive encounters. Participants’ creative identity also correlated with higher levels of *Meaning*. Here, participants often referred to a tension between the social pressures they experience as artists and a sense of purpose that compelled them to create and continue their art education. This purpose was not always explicit, and it often referred to the message participants wanted to communicate through their art, as a contribution to the world.

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“ They kind of make you think about and understand the world and why it’s a good thing to do this. (Kerry, fashion).

... I do have something good in me that I can share with other people and I feel that I want to do that with design (Maddison, new media).

---

The findings displayed in the matrix uncovered patterns between the frequencies of negative wellbeing variables counted when participants spoke of their university experiences. The highest frequency count for both survey and interview samples in [Table 5.5](#) were coded in the *Unpleasant emotions* domain and *Impacts* theme. More participants from both strands spoke about unpleasant emotional impacts when describing their time spent at university. These discussions included comments about participants’ stress and management of their workload, worry about being equipped for their future career, networking concerns, frustration when navigating administrative services, confusion about criteria, and burnout due to intensely emotional creation processes:

---

“ ... emotional burnout and just feeling burnt out is a very big problem, across all art disciplines (Riley, game design).

... it's super stressful whenever assessments are due (SP 2, graphic design).

---

Although the *Relationship* domain variables were fairly balanced throughout most rows, higher counts of *Unsupportive relationships* were identified in the *Impacts* theme. When comparing both samples, the interview participants more frequently referred to feeling isolated due to their mature age. The interview participants were more frequently coded in the *Peers* theme for mentioning negative experiences with group assessment—as demonstrated by Andrew's comment below. However, the survey participants shared more intensely negative encounters with their teachers and support services.

“ Last time I went to see a uni counsellor they told me to “suck it up buttercup.” Which made me more upset (SP 143, drawing).

You know, we've all had those nightmare groups that we've put up with. (Andrew, painting).

---

Content analysis, as displayed in this matrix, reveals relationships between what is discussed and topics that are not discussed (Krippendorff, 2013). In [Table 5.5](#), participants were less frequently counted in the *Meaning and Physical health* domains. This lack of data may support evidence that university students do not often prioritise their physical health (Orygen, 2017) and that participants did not consciously acknowledge or relate their experience as art students with the pursuit of an overarching meaningful purpose. However, it is also possible that the nature of the survey and interview questions did not draw out responses that linked

with these narrative themes. Indeed, more references to physical health were counted in the coping strategy themes ([Section 6.4.2](#)), whereas in this matrix, participants more frequently referred to managing their physical disability while at university. Furthermore, it is possible that participants did not link their physical health with their understanding of wellbeing:

---

“ ... when I hear “wellbeing”, I don't really think of physical health anymore. (Dylan, interactive design).

---

The *Engagement* domain counts in this matrix table were also lower due to fewer qualitative data coded in the *Disengagement* variable. In this case, it is possible that participants did not talk about their *Disengagement* because they were often highly focussed on their creative learning. Indeed, many participants ( $s+i=34$ ) indicated that they were so absorbed by their university workload that they neglected

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other aspects of their lives, including their relationships and physical health. These comments related to both the *Engagement* and *Achievement* domains:

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“ I have a pretty infallible determination to succeed, though it does kill me emotionally, mentally and physically (SP 130, photography).

... if I am too immersed in my work, I often forgot to eat (Nicole, interactive design).

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*I found myself relating to responses like these. In the past, my repetitive creative work contributed to a long-term wrist injury and chronic dry eyes. Other academics and artists have contended with similar physical health issues. While acknowledging the potential for me to project my own perspectives onto these findings (Finlay & Gough, 2003) I can see the*

*benefit of visual art students being taught how to manage their physical health better.*

The participants' tendency to compare their work with others ([Section 5.7](#)) was a key contributor to the negative wellbeing domain variables. These participant responses—including the exemplar comments below—indicated worry regarding the judgment of their artwork, assessment submissions, and limited creative skillsets. Hence, the responses often indicated lower levels of *Accomplishment*, *Self-esteem*, and *Pleasant emotions* counted in the *Comparison* theme. A more complete picture of how frequently interview and survey participants indicated lower features of wellbeing is displayed in the [Section 6.3](#) joint displays.

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“ I always think people will think lowly of my technical skills ... I'm too afraid to use my original ideas in fear they are stupid (SP 35, graphic design).

... I want them to think that my work is of good quality. If they don't, I sort of hate that, personally (Dale, animation).

---

To provide further insights regarding survey participants' wellbeing, the quantitative scale scores from the PERMA Profiler and K6 will now be described. The PERMA Profiler consists of 23 items answered via an 11-point scale anchored by *Never* and *Always*, or *Not at all* and *Completely*. The scores for these items were calculated by finding the average of the items arrayed in each wellbeing domain ([Table 5.6](#)). Specified as descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature (Butler & Kern, 2016), the PERMA Profiler does not have a clearly defined indication of 'high' or 'low' score categories ([Section 4.4.3](#)). Subsequently, the survey participant scores (ranging from 0-10), and internal consistency, were displayed with a validation sample (Butler & Kern, 2016) to provide a general comparison of the total sample's wellbeing profile.

The findings displayed in [Table 5.6](#) indicate that the survey participants had lower levels of wellbeing than the validation sample. Indeed, given this wellbeing 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*. Despite the weaker engagement domain alpha (Bartholomaeus, 2020; Butler & Kern, 2016) the internal consistency of all wellbeing domains was satisfactory ( $\alpha=0.86$ ). These findings, however, are not prescriptive and are subject to multiple, complex factors including the participant's culture and their understanding of what wellbeing means ([Appendix 5.2](#)). Regardless, the scores do support the frequency counts of qualitative data displayed in the matrix table ([Table 5.5](#)). A more comprehensive display of frequency counts compared to scale scores is discussed in [Section 6.3](#).

The K6 scale was used to determine the non-specific psychological distress of the survey

**Table 5.6**

*Mean and Coefficient of PERMA Profiler Survey Responses Compared with the Validation Sample*

Domains	s	Survey sample			Validation sample (Butler & Kern, 2016)	
		Mean	$\alpha$	n	Mean	$\alpha$
Positive emotion <sup>1</sup>	247	5.60	0.84	31965	6.69	0.88
Engagement <sup>2</sup>	247	7.18	0.50	31962	7.25	0.72
Relationships <sup>3</sup>	247	6.24	0.80	31940	6.90	0.82
Meaning <sup>4</sup>	247	5.64	0.87	31931	7.06	0.90
Accomplishment <sup>5</sup>	247	6.40	0.70	31963	7.21	0.79
Overall wellbeing <sup>6</sup>	247	6.13	0.92	31966	7.02	0.94
Negative emotion <sup>7</sup>	247	5.73	0.63	31386	4.46	0.71
Physical health <sup>8</sup>	247	5.26	0.82	30601	6.94	0.92
Lonely <sup>9</sup>	247	5.75	-	-	-	-
Total	247	5.99	0.86	31966	-	-

**1.** Domain includes three positive emotion items. **2.** Domain includes three engagement items. **3.** Domain includes three relationship items. **4.** Domain includes three meaning items. **5.** Domain includes three accomplishment items. **6.** Domain includes all of the positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishment items as well as the one happiness item. **7.** Domain includes three negative emotion items. **8.** Domain includes three health items. **9.** Domain includes a single loneliness item and is not comprehensively listed in the validation sample findings.

participants (Kessler et al., 2010). This scale consists of 6 items and assessed participants' mental health within the last 30 days. The survey participants rated how they felt on a 5-point scale anchored by 1=*None of the time* and 5=*All of the time*. Like the K10 score, the K6 findings were calculated by finding the sum of all items and categorising the total using either dichotomous or polychotomous score groupings (Kessler et al., 2010). The dichotomous score categories are displayed in [Table 5.7](#). The internal consistency of all K6 items was satisfactory ( $\alpha=0.84$ ) and the internal reliability of each item are displayed alongside the mean scores in [Table 5.8](#) below.

[Table 5.7](#) and [Table 5.8](#) show a larger portion of the K6 respondents were not at risk of probable mental ill-health. The percentage of participants who were described as having probable mental ill-health, however, is still concerning. These findings can be compared with the higher counts of unpleasant emotions displayed in [Table 5.5](#). Here, the frequency

**Table 5.7**  
*Total K6 Scores from Survey Sample*

K6 score categories	Category format	s	%	Mean
No probable mental ill-health	Scores between 6 and 18	143	57.89	13.77
Probable mental ill-health	Scores between 19 and 30	101	40.89	21.60
Total		244	98.79	17.01
Missing		3	1.21	
Total		247	100.00	

counts also included references to mental health difficulties, including identified anxiety or depression. Of the participants who were coded in the *Unpleasant emotion* variable ( $s+i=152$ , [Table 5.5](#)), 72 manifestly described a higher duration or intensity of negative emotions experienced, with 34 specifically mentioning their experience with depression or anxiety.

“ I’ve been depressed for so long that it really seems like there is no other option (SP 237, graphic design).  
  
 It’s almost end of semester now and I’ve noticed the anxiety returning so I saw my GP and started taking medication again. (SP 199, drawing).

*I have outlined the process for developing the coding schema and defining the wellbeing domain variables in [Appendix 5.2](#). This process was guided by my three supervisors. However, despite my efforts to thoroughly code these participant responses into the wellbeing variables, it is still worth considering the potential for coding error (Campbell et al., 2013).*

This chapter has addressed a diversity of participant perspectives and descriptions of their university experiences. Consequently, the findings begin to ‘paint a picture’ of visual art students’ wellbeing during their Australian higher education. To cultivate a more contextualised understanding of these participants’ wellbeing, the next chapter describes how participants manage their wellbeing in response to challenging experiences (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Furthermore, the findings presented in [Chapter 6](#) explore participants’ recommendations for change at university—to seek a more contextualised understanding of effective, preventative, and sustainable intervention that can support visual art students’ wellbeing.

**Table 5.8**  
*Mean and Internal Reliability of Self-administered K6*

K6 items	s	Missing	Mean	$\alpha$
Nervous <sup>1</sup>	245	2	3.27	0.82
Hopless <sup>2</sup>	244	3	2.60	0.79
Restless or fidgety <sup>3</sup>	245	2	3.08	0.85
Depressed <sup>4</sup>	245	2	2.33	0.79
Everything is an effort <sup>5</sup>	245	2	3.22	0.80
Worthless <sup>6</sup>	245	2	2.50	0.81
Total items (6 items)			2.83	0.84

**1.** How often did you feel nervous? **2.** How often did you feel hopeless? **3.** How often did you feel restless or fidgety? **4.** How often did you feel so depressed that nothing could cheer you up? **5.** How often did you feel that everything was an effort? **6.** How often did you feel worthless?



# FINDINGS *The Participants' Resilience, Wellbeing, and Recommendations*

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## 6.1: SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter provides insights into the unique ways that visual art students manage their wellbeing during undergraduate study.

Additionally, this chapter explores participants' recommendations regarding how to enhance and sustain visual art students' wellbeing through their art education. In the previous chapter, the mixed findings were compared globally within the context of narrative themes ([Section 5.1](#)). The mixed findings in this chapter are also discussed globally, but within the structure of the remaining narrative themes listed in [Section 4.5](#). To explore participants' resilience in-depth, their strategies for coping with hardship will be discussed in [Section 6.2](#). Next, an interpretation of all mixed findings relating to participants' wellbeing is summarised in [Section 6.3](#), before exploring participants' recommendations in [Section 6.4](#).

## 6.2: THE PARTICIPANTS' DEMONSTRATION OF RESILIENCE WHEN COPING WITH UNIVERSITY CHALLENGES

This section presents the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) scores and rich qualitative findings regarding participants' coping strategies to describe their resilience. The BRS was used to determine the survey participants' ability to bounce back from hard times. This scale measured participants' response to stress only, and thus the findings describe participants' resilience as a trait—rather than the active process conceptualisations that describe how participants adapt to stress (O'Donohue et al., 2019). This was intentional, given many other scales “promote positive adaption and not resilience .... in its original and most basic meaning” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 199). The BRS consists of six items with an equal number of positive and negatively worded questions to deter response bias (Smith et al., 2013). These six items have a 5-point scale anchored by *Strongly disagree* and *Strongly agree*.

The scores for the BRS were calculated as the mean of each individual item, after reverse coding the three negatively worded items. Any scores below 3.00 were categorised as *Low resilience*, whereas scores between 3.00 and 4.30 were categorised as *Average resilience* and scores above 4.30 categorised as *High resilience*. Internal consistency for the BRS was satisfactory ( $\alpha=0.86$ ) and was in the 0.80-0.91 score range identified in validation samples (Smith et al., 2008). The internal reliability, all scores, and the score categories are displayed in [Table 6.1](#).

These findings for the BRS scale items indicate that the survey participants had low to average levels of resilience. The survey sample mean of all items ( $M=2.87$ ) was also low compared to the range of combined mean scores identified in the BRS validation samples ( $M=3.53-3.98$ , Smith et al., 2008). These low resilience scores confirm the *Vulnerability* frequency counts displayed in the first matrix table ([Table 5.5](#)). However, this is because the matrix represents qualitative data from both interview and survey

**Table 6.1**

*Mean, Internal Reliability and Score Categories of Brief Resilience Scale*

Item	s	Missing	Mean	$\alpha$	Score categories
Bounce back <sup>1</sup>	244	3	3.16	0.84	Average Resilience
Recover <sup>2</sup>	244	3	2.88	0.84	Low Resilience
Come through difficult times <sup>3</sup>	244	3	2.78	0.86	Low Resilience
(Rev) making it through stress <sup>4</sup>	243	4	2.70	0.84	Low Resilience
(Rev) snap back <sup>5</sup>	243	4	2.83	0.82	Low Resilience
(Rev) get over setbacks <sup>6</sup>	243	4	2.87	0.84	Low Resilience
Total of all items (6 items)			2.87	0.86	Low Resilience

**1.** I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times. **2.** It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event. **3.** I usually come through difficult times with little trouble. **4.** (R) I have a hard time making it through stressful events. **5.** (R) It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens. **6.** (R) I tend to take a long time to get over setbacks in my life.

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participants. When the survey responses were omitted from this matrix, the interview participants were counted 64.86% more often in the *Resilience* variable compared to the *Vulnerability* variable. This convergence will be explored in [Section 6.3](#).

Both interview ( $I=29$ ) and survey participants ( $s=217$ ) were asked to describe how they coped with hard times. Although this uncovered specific coping strategies that will be discussed further, other insights surfaced regarding participants' resilience or vulnerability. For example, participants who demonstrated observable features of vulnerability were more likely to mention trouble maintaining focus, missing class, submitting their work late, or failing subjects. In these narratives, participants were more likely to describe their emotions and perceived inability to engage in normal, daily functioning. Participants who demonstrated higher levels of resilience more frequently mentioned how they bounced back from negative encounters with their teaching staff.

*When analysing participants' coping strategies, I needed to question if I had overlooked any strategies that were not prioritised by my own values and dominant Western models of thought (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Although I could perceive one participant's coping strategy as maladaptive, they might view it as adaptive (Ungar, 2011). To mitigate any misinterpretation, I carefully considered all of the participant's responses, their BRS scores, my supervisors' guidance, my codebook (Appendix 6), and research literature that explored different social and cultural understandings of resilience to make coding decisions.*

When faced with challenges during their university experience, participants revealed a breadth of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. These strategies are described as cognitive, behavioural, and social coping strategies ([Appendix 5](#)) and are outlined in the following subsections. Participant responses to these questions indicated the various ways that people coped, and as participants mentioned

( $s+i=34$ ), how each art student was responsible for their own self-management. For example, one participant (SP 121, printmaking) explained that—regardless of the services her university provided—she needed to personally learn new mental habits to address her mental health difficulties.

Although various participants ( $s+i=20$ ) had more positive and uneventful experiences at university, others needed to frequently cope with hardships such as those outlined in [Chapter 5](#). However, some participants ( $s+i=54$ ) highlighted barriers to self-management. These barriers included stigma ( $s+i=21$ ), a lack of available or proficient support ( $s+i=34$ ), a lack of motivation ( $s+i=9$ ), or time pressures ( $s+i=13$ ). Examples of help-seeking barriers are noticeable in the participant comments and [Figure 6.1](#) below:

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“ I personally need to take action .... which is difficult when I have no energy (SP 153, graphic design).

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“ I feel the support service is actually providing a barrier to students it is meant to assist through .... poor communication processes, lack of timely information and lack of access on my campus (SP 216, sculpture).

... myself and many of my friends are just too damn lazy. We're not gonna [seek help from support services]—we'd rather get food. (Mia, interactive design).

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### 6.2.1: COGNITIVE COPING STRATEGIES

When describing their coping strategies, participants ( $s+i=82$ ) identified ways of cognitively managing their response to challenges. These participants' cognitive coping strategies demonstrated instances of perseverance and grit. Indeed, participants ( $s+i=41$ ) explained or implied that they would often push through university challenges and unpleasant emotions until they could rest during the university break. Some participants

#### **Figure 6.1** **Narrative Box – Owen's Experience with Seeking Help**

In the past, Owen had relied on mental health support from three different professionals to manage his wellbeing. However, Owen decided to disconnect from this professional support, potentially because he sought independence and disliked the way the support professionals analysed him every time he spoke. Owen found it difficult to navigate university support systems, particularly when he was struggling to get out of bed but needed to acquire a doctor's certificate to get extensions. When being interviewed, Owen admitted that he was still searching for ways to successfully manage his wellbeing.

( $s+i=16$ ) were also careful to remind themselves that they were in a learning environment and there was a possibility that they would not be able to submit work that met their expectations.

“ I did continue at a lesser pace and forgave myself for not being able to give my usual 100% (SP 198, ceramics).

'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' I feel as if this is the work mode I fall into when I'm in a stressful situation (SP 69, graphic design).

... saying "I can do it" is encouraging, but it doesn't acknowledge the possibility of failure .... Whereas "F\*ck it" is more like, "just do it, it doesn't matter anymore just get it done, get something to hand in, even if you fail, having something is better than nothing" (Tina, drawing).

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Other participants ( $s+i=58$ ) described how they purposefully took time to refocus on more positive aspects of the matter at hand. For example, some participants asked how their challenges could benefit them

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(s+i=4), concentrated on different tasks or smaller aspects of their current task (s=14), or intentionally remembered how their goals and art brought them happiness or purpose (s+i=28). Reflection was important for participants (s+i=10) who remembered how much they had improved and their capability for overcoming university challenges, whereas 22 survey participants simply explained that they had learnt not to take things so seriously. Maddison's narrative box ([Figure 6.2](#)) provides additional insights into how some art students cope with challenges.

### 6.2.2: BEHAVIOURAL COPING STRATEGIES

The participants' responses (s+i=195) indicated responsive and preventative behavioural strategies that helped them cope with university challenges. For example, participants (s+i=37) responded to challenges by intentionally setting aside time to rest, which occasionally required missing classes, dropping subjects, deferring, or asking for an extension. Many

participants (s+i=123) practised self-care by learning more about the challenge they were experiencing, or participating in recreational activities that ranged from watching a movie and having a beer, to gardening or walking their pets outdoors. For other participants (s+i=3), activities such as online gaming or social media browsing were purposefully used to find inspiration for their artwork. Alternatively, participants (s+i=77) mentioned that they engaged in these recreational activities to zone out or clear their heads:

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“ Sometimes I take a mental health day and don't do any uni work ... (SP 199, drawing).

I literally went for a walk around campus at ten o'clock at night on a Sunday .... You know, it's just really peaceful so you can just empty your mind, I guess (Nick, digital media).

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#### **Figure 6.2** **Narrative Box – Some of Maddison's Coping Strategies**

Since transitioning from a science degree into her current creative arts degree, Maddison found that she was able to cope better with her mental health difficulties. When Maddison compared the two degrees, she highlighted her very positive experience with the arts because she had a chance to discover more about herself and see the world in a different way. Through her creative degree, Maddison had learnt to view criticism of her work not as a criticism of herself, but rather a chance to improve—and better prepare for her future in the workforce—by incorporating the lessons into her work.

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*When I was an undergraduate student, I felt like I was part of a busy culture where purposeful resting (for longer than half a day) was viewed as a sign of weakness. In hindsight, I realise that I subconsciously worried I would be excluded by my peers and teachers—and future creative employers—if I purposefully took time off to rest during a semester. When processing participants' description of their coping strategies, I contemplated how certain strategies might be perceived as more acceptable than others. Was an entire weekend spent travelling less acceptable than binge-watching movies with mates for one night? Were hours spent procrastinating in a study room viewed as rest? On another note, how did my own study habits influence the way I viewed participants' responses?*

Some participants also responded to a direct question about their coping strategies by describing maladaptive processes. These processes included maladaptive procrastination and avoidance ( $s=32$ ); self-harm ( $s+i=2$ ); crying ( $s+i=8$ ); having an unhealthy diet or relying on

excessive dieting ( $s+i=8$ ); or having a less than healthy reliance on alcohol, drugs, and tobacco ( $s+i=33$ ). Other participants, however, invested time in maintaining a healthier lifestyle to protect their wellbeing during stressful university times. These strategies are detailed below.

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“ As a whole I've been trying to be healthier with how I deal with university stress (SP 100, traditional illustration).

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To maintain a healthier lifestyle, participants focussed on eating healthier ( $s=5$ ), avoiding drugs and alcohol ( $s=6$ ), exercising ( $s+i=43$ ), and sleeping ( $s+i=18$ ). Some participants ( $s+i=33$ ) dedicated themselves to meditation, self-help apps, and other mindfulness-related activities including yoga and praying. Six survey participants also managed their wellbeing by taking sleeping medication and prescribed mental health medication, and others used strategies including to-do lists or calendars to

manage their time and university workloads ( $s+i=37$ ). Examples of coping strategies are displayed below:

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“ ... what really helps me is, weeks in advance, making a calendar and blocking out what I want to do and when (Leah, design).

I indulge in sleep [laughs] (Elisa, interactive design).

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The participants' creative strategies came into play when they needed to bounce back from challenges. As Susan observed in [Figure 6.3](#), some participants ( $s+i=18$ ) found that listening to music provided a simple, and sometimes critical, way for them to relax or persevere with their work. Various participants ( $s+i=27$ ) created art that was purposefully separate from their university work, or took specific creative direction with their assessment to satisfy their

**Figure 6.3**  
**Narrative Box – Some of Susan’s**  
**Coping Strategies**

Susan used a variety of coping strategies to help her when she was working through mental health difficulties. While also seeking help from others, Susan invested time in researching wellbeing and self-regulation to help her work through her emotions during hard times. When she experienced creative blocks, Susan referred to her Headspace app or practised kindness towards herself by taking a break—otherwise called ‘me time’. During this time, Susan treated herself to something nice to eat and remind herself that no one is perfect. Susan found that playing music or Youtube videos while also making art was distracting, but she noticed that a lot of her peers used this additional sensory strategy to help them create.

needs. For example, Riley took steps to make ‘dull’ assessment interesting by submitting novel creative solutions—such as an interactive app rather than a formal presentation. Similarly, Jasper worked through his difficulty with mental health difficulties by creating a short film that explored his identity further:

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“ But I have found good ways to actually thrive. I did a little, mini documentary this last semester ... (Jasper, new media).

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### 6.2.3: SOCIAL COPING STRATEGIES

The participants’ relationships with their friends at university, or artists and other friends external to university, played a big role in helping them cope. Whether they specifically spoke with their friends about their university or wellbeing challenges ( $s+i=63$ ) or they simply socialised with their friends to relax ( $s+i=25$ ), a majority of these participants

( $s+i=121$ ) mentioned how their friendships supported them during university, and as artists. Some of these relationships became sustainable through social media platforms, as demonstrated in the narrative box below (Figure 6.4). The more unsupportive relations that participants experienced pertained to participants’ friends who were ill-equipped to help or unable to understand their university and wellbeing challenges ( $s+i=15$ ). Furthermore, some participants ( $s+i=40$ ) referred to being lonely or explained that they were unable to make many close friends, sometimes because of their difference in age:

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“ Sadly I have not yet made good friends at the art school, and I think mature age students suffer in this regard (SP 141, printmaking).

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While friendships were more frequently mentioned, participants also relied on

relationships with their partners (s+i=41) and family members (s+i=67) to help. For some participants (s+i=13), maintaining a social connection with their family and partners was important for their wellbeing, whereas other survey and interview participants (s+i=53) specifically sought support about their problems. Examples of these help-seeking behaviours are highlighted in the participant comments below. Support networks like these were perceived as unavailable for participants (s+i=18) who felt their family did not help or understand them, or they had broken up with their partner.

“ Then I go back home and talk to my parents .... Yeah, I just talk. And I try and step back from the situation. Sort of, try and logic it out [laughs] (Ella, painting).

My boyfriend supports me through everything .... Without him I probably would have had a few mental breakdowns (SP 1, graphic design).

*In many of their responses, participants often identified who they socialised with or who they sought help from, not why or how they reached out for help, or what was discussed when they did so. I explore the limitations of these less detailed responses further in [Section 6.2.4](#).*

A range of university staff and external healthcare professionals also provided support to participants. While on campus, participants sought learning and wellbeing assistance from their teaching and administrative staff (s+i=85) and professional support services (s+i=58). Although a majority (s+i=107) of these encounters seemed positive, there were times when participants had limited or difficult encounters with support services (s+i=19) or teaching and administrative staff (s+i=44). Other participants acquired off-campus support on an occasional or regular basis from therapists (s+i=5), psychologists (s+i=20), psychiatrists (s+i=10), the hospital (i=2), or general practitioners and other healthcare providers (s+i=19). Participants’

**Figure 6.4**  
**Narrative Box – Nick’s Time Management, Wellbeing, and Peer Support**

Despite seeing his degree as a walk in the park compared to his past job, there were times when Nick’s workload increased and he neglected his wellbeing. When Nick was under the pump, he found that Facebook group chats with his peers made a big difference. Being a part of a Facebook group gave Nick and his peers a chance to share their problems in a low-pressure, online group setting. Nick found that the size of the group (15-20 people) and the fact that they were all sharing similar experiences made the online group dynamics casual and light. This type of space helped the students feel like they belonged in a community even if, as Nick stated, some were uncomfortable with talking about certain challenges. Nick and his peers continued to use the group chat, even though some had already graduated.

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reasons for seeking internal or external professional support often related to travel times, availability, cost, quality, the range of support, the type of problem that participants were experiencing, or trust. These different help-seeking experiences are expressed by participants in the following quotes.

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“ I’m not alone in not wanting to deal with student services. Quite a few of my cohort are very reluctant to deal with them (Caroline, sculpture).

My specific academy’s support is very good. The teachers often approach students about how they’re going and recommend and help us to seek further help (SP 167, animation).

My GP seems like only person I can trust but he’s also hard to get appointments with (SP 212, painting).

I’ve just been able to access private services that have been more professional and better equipped. (Marylin, printmaking).

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When asked about their coping strategies, participants (s+i=43) mentioned that they preferred not to seek help and at times let their problems ‘build up’. One survey participant (SP 250, photography) explained that they needed to hide their problems to prove they were worthy, whereas another survey participant (SP 89, graphic design) refrained from seeking help to a point where they failed more than one subject because they were worried that their problems would be too confronting for others. Although these participants used more maladaptive avoidance of seeking help, others found seeking help unnecessary (s+i=7) or worked through their challenges better when they were alone (s=2). Reasons for not help-seeking are demonstrated in the following two comments.

“ I haven’t really had any huge problems that have come up. Just small problems with assignments and stuff (Dylan, interactive design).

I avoid asking for help at all costs. I don’t like to admit that I am in a tough position, not even to myself .... I’m usually the one [that] others turn to for help. (SP 89, graphic design).

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*When considering how some participants described pushing through challenges without seeking help, I thought of how this could possibly impact their wellbeing as well as their creative output and aspirations for the future. This behaviour could lead to positive or negative outcomes, depending on students’ internal and external resources. For example, the sense of achievement that an art student feels when being able to push through challenges could reinforce positive views on their capabilities*

as an artist. However, without sufficient time to rest, it could also lead to burnout as Elisa mentioned in her interview ([Figure 6.5](#)).

#### 6.2.4: HOW THE PARTICIPANTS' RESILIENCE IMPACTED THEIR WELLBEING

The matrix table below ([Table 6.2](#)) summarises how participants' coping strategies positively or negatively influenced their wellbeing. [Table 6.2](#) includes the Impacts theme again for context. When comparing the findings previously presented in [Table 5.5](#) with the findings displayed in [Table 6.2](#), the frequency counts in the *Engagement* and *Meaning* wellbeing domains are notably lower for the coping strategy themes. However, there are more frequency counts in the *Physical health* and *Resilience* domains. This is because participants' comments about their behavioural coping strategies more regularly referred to their diet and exercise. Given many of these responses directly related to resilience being an active process (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), the majority of responses were

counted in the *Resilience* domain. The survey participants were less likely to mention other features of wellbeing when describing the way that they coped with challenges.

Although many of the previously discussed coping strategies can be described as adaptive, the purpose and moderation of the participant's self-care also indicated maladaptive coping. For example, one survey participant (SP 45, graphic design) scrolled through social media to gain inspiration, whereas another (SP 3, graphic design) used it to procrastinate for long periods of time. Similarly, some participants drank one glass of alcohol or took a nap to cope with a challenge—whereas others drank and slept excessively, thus impacting their health and progress with their university degree. To determine how frequently the participants coping strategies were adaptive or maladaptive, they were sorted into the *Resilience* and *Vulnerability* wellbeing variables, alongside other frequency counts in the *Resilience* domain ([Appendix 5.2](#)).

#### Figure 6.5

##### Narrative Box – Elisa's Experience with Managing University Challenges

In her previous year as a student, Elisa had to juggle unforeseen external responsibilities with her already full study commitments. She found the time really challenging and at one stage came close to seeking help by calling Beyond Blue. However, Elisa decided that instead of acquiring professional help, she simply needed to address her physical health by sleeping or eating and then pushing forward. At the end of the trimester, Elisa was proud to find that most of her grades were maintained despite experiencing challenges during that time. However, Elisa knew that she needed to pace herself to avoid burn out in the future.

**Table 6.2**

*Matrix Table Comparing the Frequency of Wellbeing Domains and Narrative Themes Detailing Impacts on Wellbeing and How Participants Cope with Challenges in their Degree*

Domain/theme	Emotion		Engagement		Relationships		Meaning		Accomplishment		Physical health		Resilience		Self-Esteem	
Domain/theme variables	Pe <sup>1</sup>	Ue <sup>2</sup>	E <sup>3</sup>	De <sup>4</sup>	Sr <sup>5</sup>	Ur <sub>6</sub>	M <sup>7</sup>	Lm <sup>8</sup>	A <sup>9</sup>	La <sup>10</sup>	H <sup>11</sup>	Ph <sup>12</sup>	Res <sup>13</sup>	Vuln <sup>14</sup>	Est <sup>15</sup>	PEs <sup>16</sup>
Impacts on wellbeing	34	<b>147</b> <sup>17</sup>	27	26	47	90	29	15	33	76	4	29	41	95	23	98
Cognitive coping	11	13	12	0	6	2	10	3	17	2	0	1	49	12	11	5
Behavioural coping	10	14	17	1	10	4	5	0	20	4	13	13	<b>138</b> <sup>17</sup>	59	1	1
Social coping	11	26	2	0	<b>104</b> <sup>17</sup>	35	9	3	8	0	0	4	<b>144</b> <sup>17</sup>	41	6	3

**1.** Pleasant emotion. **2.** Unpleasant emotion. **3.** Engagement. **4.** Disengagement. **5.** Supportive relationship. **6.** Unsupportive relationship **7.** Meaning. **8.** Low meaning. **9.** Accomplishment **10.** Low accomplishment. **11.** Health. **12.** Poor health. **13.** Resilience. **14.** Vulnerability. **15.** Self-esteem. **16.** Poor Self-esteem. **17.** These frequency counts are outlined further in the chapter.

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When specifically discussing their coping strategies, participants were counted more frequently in the *Resilience* rather than the *Vulnerability* variable. This can be seen by comparing the *Impacts* theme with the other coping strategy themes displayed in [Table 6.2](#). Such findings are reasonable, given the qualitative survey and interview questions were designed for participants to list their coping strategies, rather than describing whether or not their strategies were successful in helping them prevent negative impacts on their wellbeing. These findings uncovered insights regarding the way participants demonstrated resilience alongside other features of wellbeing. For example, one survey participant (SP 167) expressed emotions when they explained how they managed their problems, by acknowledging these emotions and seeking mastery over them.

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“Knowing it isn’t as bad as it FEELS and that I CAN work through it (SP 167, animation).”

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*Many of the interview participant responses were counted in both the Resilience variable and Emotions domain. This was because their responses included a description of the way the unpleasant challenge made them feel when they were in the process of bouncing back. When participants described the outcomes of their experience, they were more likely to express positive features of wellbeing.*

In another example, Grace portrayed unpleasant emotions, supportive relationships, and meaning when describing her challenges at university and the way she coped with them. In this case, Grace was negatively affected by experiences with administrative mismanagement and devaluing stereotypes, but she relied on her tight-knit community of artists and art students for support and reassurance that what she did as an artist was meaningful. Grace explained that many artists similarly ‘band together’ and form strong communities to cope with common creative challenges. One survey participant (SP 122, natural history illustration) also referred to

a sense of meaning when describing the benefits of stronger peer and teacher bonds:

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“ [It] helps to quieten the comparison that goes on internally between people ... feeling a sense of belonging in a community of like-minded individuals is one of the keys to furthering the wellbeing of people. It gives us a sense of purpose and place. (SP 122, natural history illustration).”

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Not all participants used their social connections to directly address their wellbeing challenges. Despite various participants’ explanations that relaxing with friends and family helped them cope ( $s+i=31$ ), this method may not have always been sustainable or effective for helping participants thrive at university. When observing her peers, Piper noticed that students were more inclined to use their friendship—alongside other recreational activities—as ‘pacifiers’ that could

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provide momentary relief but did not help them sufficiently address the problems they were having. Elisa, however, provided an alternate view on how venting to her friends helped:

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“ ... I did read somewhere that complaining about the tiniest things help you release stress. I think that works for me (Elisa, interactive design).

You need a social worker or a psychologist to actually tell you what's happening and give you better guidance, but they'd rather not (Piper, interactive design).

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Other survey and interview participants who were counted in the *Supportive relationships* variable demonstrated observable features of vulnerability and unpleasant emotions. In some of these cases, participants explained that their supportive relationships were not enough to help

them manage their wellbeing. Other participants relied heavily on supportive relationships, such as the participants ( $s+i=4$ ) who used responsibility to their loved ones as a way to prevent themselves from suiciding. Jane also demonstrated features of vulnerability and supportive relationships when she expressed her sincere desire to respect her counsellor, even though her pretence prevented her from getting the support she needed:

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“ I hope my counsellor [is] feeling her work is meaningful and that she does a great job. So I will pretend I'm okay (Jane, ceramics).

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It is difficult to determine exactly how effective the coping strategies presented in [Table 6.2](#) are. The survey participants may have avoided spending extra time divulging the results of their coping strategies in their short responses, and there were cases where the interview participants were not prompted to explain their responses

further ([Section 3.5.5](#)). Given the range of contexts surrounding the way a participant coped—including the intensity and duration of challenges they experienced and the resources they had available to cope—it is difficult to determine how resilient participants were without comparing these insights with other findings.

Although the previously discussed scale scores and matrix tables contribute to a description of participants' wellbeing, clarity can be gained by further merging the findings. This is achieved by displaying an overview of all quantitative and qualitative findings from the survey participants, and the rich qualitative data from the interview participants. Integrating the findings this way enhances the comparison of how survey and interview participants mentioned their wellbeing within the context of the wellbeing domains. The mixed findings presented in the next section portray a 'descriptive dashboard' of wellbeing features.<sup>[22]</sup>

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22. See Adler and Seligman (2016), Huppert and So (2013), Kern et al. (2015), and Seligman (2018).

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### 6.3: THE PARTICIPANT'S WELLBEING DESCRIBED BY INTEGRATED FINDINGS

The findings discussed in [Chapter 5](#) and [Section 6.2](#) provide a description of Australian visual art students' wellbeing as they experience higher education. These findings aim to meet the first research objective ([Section 1.2](#)). To further describe the current mental health, wellbeing, and resilience of participants in relation to the narrative themes, the quantitative and qualitative data were also visualised together in two joint displays ([Table 6.3](#) and [Table 6.4](#)). [Table 6.3](#) provides insights regarding the qualitative and quantitative findings from the survey alone, whereas [Table 6.4](#) presents mixed findings from both the Survey and Interview Strand. These tables depict the mixed findings according to the wellbeing domains—like those listed on axis 0 in the matrix tables ([Table 5.5](#) and [Table 6.2](#)).

The data in [Table 6.3](#) provides a comparison of the survey scale scores and the qualitative short survey responses, displayed according to each

wellbeing domain. The columns in [Table 6.3](#) present information about the scales; the mean scores from the entire survey sample; and the identification, scores, and an exemplar quote from one survey participant. Each individual participant was selected and displayed in the wellbeing domain row because their quantitative scale scores and quotes from their short responses better demonstrated the high and low results in that wellbeing domain. Hence, the mixed survey data in [Table 6.3](#) portray a case study of individuals drawn from the survey sample, to elaborate on the quantitative findings from the survey scales.

The mixed findings displayed in [Table 6.3](#) demonstrate a convergence of data that is also visualised in [Table 6.4](#). This comparison of the mixed survey findings uncovered cases of data divergence that are not specifically displayed in the joint displays. For example, one survey participant's BRS scores suggested they had low levels of resilience, yet the same participant (SP 183, digital illustration) indicated resilience

when referring to how their supportive university environment helped them manage their insecurities during class critiques.

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“ I realised that my peers all probably shared these same insecurities. (SP 183, digital illustration). ”

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Another participant (SP 175, printmaking) had low K6 scales scores and was sorted into the *No probable mental ill-health* category, yet in their short response, expressed how they felt “increasingly anxious” about how their work would be received. This participant went on to discuss their positive relationships with their partner and family, which supports their higher score in the PERMA Profiler *Relationships* domain.

**Table 6.3**

*Wellbeing Attributes, Scale and Format of Scale, Mean Scores of **Survey** Sample According to Domain Variables, and Comparable Score and Extract from Short Response of Selected Participant*

Domain	Domain variables	Scale	Response Format	Sample mean	Selected Participant ID	Participant mean	Example of observable features of domain extracted from participant's short responses
P <sup>1</sup>	Pleasant emotion	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	5.60	SP 160	8.67	I have been very happy with my current project.
	Unpleasant emotion	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	5.73 <sup>a</sup>	SP 189	9.00 <sup>a</sup>	I worry constantly about my ability to produce art.
E <sup>2</sup>	Engagement	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	7.18	SP 160	8.33	My work is my meditation. My safe place.
	Disengagement	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	- <sup>b</sup>	SP 158	4.33	I often lose interest in the class ...
R <sup>3</sup>	Supportive relationships	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	6.24	SP 65	8.33	I manage by having a really supportive environment.
	Unsupportive relationships	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	5.75 <sup>c</sup>	SP 149	10.00 <sup>c</sup>	I do not have friends in Queensland, and do not have a social life.
M <sup>4</sup>	Meaning	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	5.64	SP 172	8.00	I make art to inspire and evoke emotional responses within my audience ...
	Low meaning	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	- <sup>b</sup>	SP 185	0.00	I often feel like I have no talent, am wasting my life and don't deserve to be at uni.

Domain	Domain variables	Scale	Response Format	Sample mean	Selected Participant ID	Participant mean	Example of observable features of domain extracted from participant's short responses
A <sup>5</sup>	Accomplishment	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	6.40	SP 76	9.67	[I] Keep organized and work hard to keep focussed on my goals.
	Low accomplishment	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	- <sup>b</sup>	SP 34	4.00	Sometimes, I don't feel I know enough or understand things enough to make a good effort of work .... if I do something different it will be wrong and I won't do well.
H <sup>6</sup>	Health	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	5.26	SP 60	9.33	I enjoy sport .... to help forget about uni stresses for a brief period.
	Poor health	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	- <sup>b</sup>	SP 139	3.67	I try to eat healthily but often don't, I often drink alcohol.
WB <sup>7</sup>	Thriving	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	6.13	SP 213	9.00	I used to worry a little but now I understand how accepting the art community .... I'm typically not a very stressed person.
	Languishing	PERMA Profiler	Likert scale (0=never, 10=always)	- <sup>b</sup>	SP 185	2.28	I am cripplingly insecure about my abilities and my worth as an artist and a human being .... I am still learning how to deal with university life and the personal nature of my degree without that crutch [alcohol].

Domain	Domain variables	Scale	Response Format	Sample mean	Selected Participant ID	Participant mean	Example of observable features of domain extracted from participant's short responses
MH <sup>8</sup>	No probable mental ill-health	K6 Scale	Likert scale (1=none of the time, 5=always)	2.29 <sup>d</sup>	SP 258	1.33	I don't worry that much. My art evolves and changes... I have got good grades throughout my studies, so that tends to encourage me.
	Probable mental ill-health	K6 Scale	Likert scale (1=none of the time, 5=always)	3.60 <sup>e</sup>	SP 68	4.67	I had no choice to complete my degree and it literally caused so much anxiety I couldn't sleep.
Res <sup>9</sup>	Resilience	Brief Resilience Scale	Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	3.55 <sup>f</sup>	SP 136	5.00	... sometimes it does hurt when you work so hard on something and then have someone say they don't like it, but that's life. So no, I do not worry over other people's opinions, I just do what I am capable of.
	Vulnerability	Brief Resilience Scale	Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	2.28 <sup>g</sup>	SP 42	1.67	I become dissociative and just lay somewhere until I can bring myself to move, I do that for most things and it's crushing. I wish I weren't so compelled to do it.

**1.** Positive emotion domain. **2.** Engagement domain. **3.** Relationship domain. **4.** Meaning domain. **5.** Accomplishment domain. **6.** Physical health. **7.** Overall Wellbeing. **8.** Mental ill-health. **9.** Resilience.

**a.** This score was calculated using the three negative emotion items from the PERMA Profiler. **b.** The PERMA Profiler did not measure this domain variable. **c.** Calculated using the PERMA Profiler Loneliness item. **d.** Calculated using the K6 scores of the sample (s=143) categorised in No probable mental ill-health. **e.** Calculated using the K6 scores of the sample (s=101) categorised in Probable mental ill-health. **f.** Calculated using the BRS scores of the sample categorised in Average resilience (s=103) and High Resilience (s=10). **g.** Calculated using the BRS scores of the sample categorised in Low resilience (s=130).

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Although providing an insightful perspective of the survey findings, the data in [Table 6.3](#) does not include the qualitative frequency counts nor the interview findings. Given the heavier weighting of the qualitative Interview Strand ([Section 3.5](#)) and the limitations of survey short responses that do not serve as a complete qualitative data set ([Section 3.5.4.4](#)), it was important to merge the rich interview findings with those in the Survey Strand through another joint display. To discover further relationships between the mixed findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), [Table 6.4](#) provides data that demonstrates how the quantitative scale scores, frequency counts, and all qualitative responses relate to each other—to provide a more complete picture of the research participants' current wellbeing.

In [Table 6.4](#), the mixed research findings have been arrayed according to each wellbeing domain variable, to find any agreement or disagreement in the findings. As in [Table 6.3](#), each row in [Table 6.4](#) represents a wellbeing

domain variable. The Variables column presents a description of the scale categories and wellbeing domain variables that were previously defined through the matrix tables. The frequency in which survey and interview participants are sorted into the domain variables is arrayed by the second (N) and third (%) columns. For example, in the *Engagement* domain row, the frequency that participants scored high on engagement in the PERMA Profiler, and the frequency with which survey and interview participants are qualitatively coded in the *Engagement* theme, are arrayed alongside column four—where survey and interview quotes representing the observable features of engagement are displayed.

This approach for merging survey scores in the joint table required careful consideration, particularly when displaying the PERMA profiler findings. The PERMA Profiler score categories displayed in [Table 6.4](#) below have been used only to sort scale findings into the wellbeing domain variables. To deter any unhealthy aspirations for an 'ideal' version of Butler and

Kern's (2016) wellbeing profile, the PERMA Profiler categories have not been clearly defined. Instead, a midpoint (anchored by a 0-10 range) was set at 7 to split the positively skewed scale findings ([Section 5.10](#)) into high and low categories. It is in the best interest of this research that the high and low categories be used to describe the wellbeing features of participants, rather than identify compromised wellbeing ([Section 1.2](#)).

The survey scale results in [Section 6.4](#) are formatted in blue for easier comparison and were defined using the specified score categories. For example, the *Resilience* row displays two of the three BRS score categories: *High resilience* and *Average resilience*. The *Vulnerability* row displays the final BRS score category, *Low resilience*. Other rows, such as *Pleasant emotions*, retain scores from more than one scale. The first *Pleasant emotions* row displays the K6 scores from the *No probable mental ill-health* category, and two PERMA Profiler score categories, including participants

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who scored higher in the *Pleasant emotion* domain and those who scored lower in the *Unpleasant emotion* domain.

The survey participants' scale scores exclude any participant scale responses with missing data. However, the frequency counts from the survey's qualitative short responses were not excluded if a participant did not answer all three questions. Instead, the survey frequency count percentage for themes—formatted in black and presented in column three (%)—was calculated by using the portion of all survey participants who answered at least one of the short response questions ( $s=206$ ). No qualitative interview data were excluded from this table, although the nature of the semi-structured interviews did alter the frequency with which all interview questions were asked ([Section 3.5.5](#)).

Both frequency columns in [Table 6.4](#) provide a more comprehensive comparison of the survey and interview participants' wellbeing. For

example, a convergence of mixed data can be seen when comparing the frequency of higher engagement scores from the PERMA Profiler with the higher *Engagement* frequency counts from the interview and survey qualitative responses. However, the data displayed in [Table 6.4](#) also reveals silences from the survey qualitative data, such as the higher percentage of the *Engagement* frequency counts that were contributed by the interview participants. Despite being more frequently coded in the *Engagement* rather than the *Disengagement* variable, only a small percentage of survey participants (5.83%) showed features of engagement in their short responses.

Similarly, a very small percentage of survey participants were counted in the *Low meaning* and *Health* variables. As discussed in [Section 5.10](#), this may be because the nature of survey questions did not draw out responses that linked with these wellbeing domains. For example, participants may not immediately relate topics—such as university staff or recommendations to reform education—with their beliefs or sense

of meaning. It is also possible that, given the online nature of data collection, fewer survey participants were prepared to write about their purpose in life because it could take longer to describe this feature. Regardless, a clearer picture of the survey participants' observable features of low meaning and health is achieved by comparing the frequency counts with the PERMA scale scores displayed in [Table 6.4](#).

*I view the Meaning domain as a highly important aspect of my own wellbeing. However, I feel less inclined to speak about my personal beliefs, especially to strangers. I can understand if participants felt similarly, yet I also needed to consider if my own preconceptions impacted the way that data were collected. Were my questions designed with an expectation that participants would not want to discuss topics relating to the Meaning domain? Did I project my expectations onto participants during the interviews, thus hindering my probing or the participant's ability to share this type of information?*

**Table 6.4**

*Wellbeing Attributes and Variables Compared with Frequency Count of **Survey** and **Interview** Sample and Observable Features of Wellbeing Attributes Extracted from Qualitative Responses*

Domain variables	Scale categories and themes	N	Sample %	Observable features
Pe <sup>1</sup>	PERMA Profiler – PE scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=61	24.70%	We are at our most happiest when we have the conditions to create (SP 171, sculpture).
	PERMA Profiler – NE scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=175	70.85%	
	K6 Scale – No probable mental ill-health (scores between 6 and 18)	s=143	58.61%	[I'm] actually finding myself happier than I've ever been and understanding myself a lot better (Anne, painting).
	Pleasant emotion theme	s=25 i=28	12.14% 96.55%	It's so fun discovering little things about art and design (Piper, interactive design).
Ue <sup>2</sup>	PERMA Profiler – PE scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=186	75.30%	I'm constantly worried about what I'm doing and if it's good enough compared to everyone around me. (SP 92, graphic design).
	PERMA Profiler – NE scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=72	29.15%	
	K6 Scale – Probable mental ill-health (scores between 19 and 30)	s=101	41.39%	... because you are really stressing all the time, obviously ... (Dylan, interactive design).
	Unpleasant emotion theme	s=124 i=28	60.19% 96.55%	I do have issues with body dysphoria, depression and anxiety (Jasper, new media).
E <sup>3</sup>	PERMA Profiler – E scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=149	60.32%	I make what I love (SP 115, interdisciplinary).
	Engagement theme	s=12 i=29	5.83% 100.00%	I feel more passionate and I'm engaged and I'm loving it. I'm doing really well, which is fantastic! (Ava, interactive design).

Domain variables	Scale categories and themes	N	Sample %	Observable features
De <sup>4</sup>	PERMA Profiler – E scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=98	39.68%	Even though I am aware of the importance of core units and of theory-based work I find it hard to engage with them ... (SP 79, graphic design).  But it's very hard to get that flow on if you're only allowing yourself an hour or two here or there ... (James, drawing).
	Disengagement theme	s=9	4.37%	
		i=20	68.97%	
Sr <sup>5</sup>	PERMA Profiler – R scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=108	43.72%	I've noticed over the years that having a stronger connection to teachers and peers has really helped individuals and groups ... (SP 122, natural history illustration).  My boyfriend's the one who's been [the] number one support that I have as well (Maddison, new media).
	PERMA Profiler – Lon scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=142	57.49%	
	Supportive relationships theme	s=86	41.75%	
		i=29	100.00%	
Ur <sup>6</sup>	PERMA Profiler – R scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=139	56.28%	... it's difficult to make new friends, and can be lonely at uni, which makes your personal life even harder when you don't have many outside of uni (SP 252, digital illustration).  I had a very negative experience with the person that I met with to get that help (Louise, graphic design).
	PERMA Profiler – Lon scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=105	42.51%	
		s=68	33.01%	
	Unsupportive relationships theme	i=29	100.00%	

Domain variables	Scale categories and themes	N	Sample %	Observable features
M <sup>7</sup>	PERMA Profiler – M scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=76	30.77%	The more interaction I have with outsiders though, I realise that my art is valued by others (SP 173, sculpture).  It's the best thing that we can really do for the world, is to be artists (Grace, painting).
	Meaning theme	s=29	14.08%	
		i=24	82.76%	
Lm <sup>8</sup>	PERMA Profiler – M scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=171	69.23%	Ever since my uni discontinued my degree .... I've been feeling like my degree is useless (SP 2, graphic design).  I feel it's too difficult to survive. When I suffer the mental problem it's really difficult for me. I just, I don't know the meaning of life and I just wanting to die (Jane, ceramics).
	Low meaning theme	s=14	6.80%	
		i=5	17.24%	
A <sup>9</sup>	PERMA Profiler – A scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=103	41.70%	I work extremely hard throughout the semester for good grades. I want to achieve high so I can work towards postgraduate study (SP 250, photography).  But, yeah, I've done really well. To the point where I'm getting a prize for one of the extracurricular programs I'm doing. (Leah, design).
	Accomplishment theme	s=23	11.17%	
		i=26	89.66%	

Domain variables	Scale categories and themes	N	Sample %	Observable features
La <sup>10</sup>	PERMA Profiler – A scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=144	58.30%	... Need a serious rework for neurodiverse students ....
	Low accomplishment theme	s=53 i=24	25.73% 82.76%	I failed 6 classes while studying 'cos I tried to make it work (SP 236, painting).  I'm on my fifth year of uni. I failed a whole year. Two whole semesters. That was bad, hey (Yasmin, digital media).
H <sup>11</sup>	PERMA Profiler – H scores (scores between 7 and 10)	s=50	20.24%	I love exercising because I can exert a lot of frustration, energy and focus on something else for a little while and then tend back to my university studies. (SP 195, animation).
	Good somatic symptoms theme	s=10 i=6	4.85% 20.69%	Having access to microwaves and kettles is super helpful, because I can control what I eat and when (Tina, drawing).
Ph <sup>12</sup>	PERMA Profiler – H scores (scores between 1 and 6)	s=197	79.76%	I try to eat healthily but often don't, I often drink alcohol (SP 139, digital illustration).
	Poor somatic symptoms theme	s=19 i=17	9.22% 58.62%	I would say, when things get a bit hectic .... I put my health aside a bit, I don't really sleep well and I eat terribly and I get really stressed and like, have panic attacks and stuff (Sophie, 3D animation).

Domain variables	Scale categories and themes	N	Sample %	Observable features
Res <sup>13</sup>	BRS – Average Resilience (scores between 3.00 and 4.30)	s=103	42.39%	Being a mature age student who was raised 3 kids and worked for almost 30 years prior to studying full-time, I suppose I find it easier to manage stressful situations (SP 170, animation).  ... I sort of like stepped back and was like “Oh, she was telling me that for a reason, and now I’ve got to sort of figure out .... what do I want to achieve with my art, why do I do it?” It just made me, um, sort of rethink everything, which is I think ultimately it was really good (Ella, painting).
	BRS – High Resilience (scores between 4.31 and 5.00)	s=10	4.12%	
	Resilience theme	s=167 i=28	81.07% 96.55%	
Vul <sup>14</sup>	BRS – Low Resilience (scores between 1.00 and 2.99)	s=130	53.50%	I don’t manage well, I often cry and feel depressed, unable to recover for a long time. my only escape is online gaming but that doesn’t actually make the situation better (SP 35, graphic design).  Quite frankly, I don’t cope .... So I break and then I just, while broken, get medical exceptions and—because I’ve never been taught how to cope, to take initiative. It’s not a need for me, to take initiative, but it’s the one thing I have to do in order to thrive in my degree. So it’s a rock and a hard place (Owen, new media).
	Vulnerability theme	s=84	40.78%	
		i=16	55.17%	

1. Pleasant emotion. 2. Unpleasant emotion. 3. Engagement. 4. Disengagement. 5. Supportive relationship. 6. Unsupportive relationship 7. Meaning. 8. Low meaning. 9. Accomplishment 10. Low accomplishment. 11. Health. 12. Poor health. 13. Resilience. 14. Vulnerability.

Compared to the survey sample, a higher percentage of interview participants were counted in all positive wellbeing domain variables. When referring to the *Impacts* narrative theme in the matrix tables, the interview participants discussed negative impacts on their wellbeing 23.96% of the time, whereas the survey participants were counted in these negative variables 76.04% of the time when describing their university experiences. While being mindful that the interview questions were designed to also examine participants' strengths and thus provide a more complete picture of participants' wellbeing (Section 3.5.5), the frequency counts of qualitative data combined with scale scores do portray the survey participants as languishing more than the interview participants.

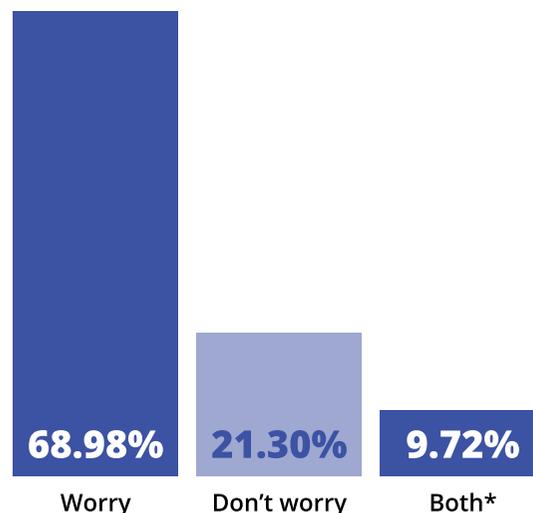
Most (73.54%<sup>[23]</sup>) of the negatively orientated frequency counts identified in the qualitative data

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23. This value was calculated using NVivo 12 Plus by comparing the nodes representing lower wellbeing features with the survey participants' responses to the first short response question.

**Figure 6.6**

*Visualisation of Survey Participant Answers to the First Short Response Question*



were from survey participants who responded to the first short response question. The intention of the first short response question in the survey (Figure 6.6) was to elucidate art students' social concerns and self-comparison (Section 3.5.4.4). Although this may have influenced the frequency count of qualitative codes, the quantitative scales—positioned before the short response questions in the survey design—also provide

**Survey question 1. Do you spend much time worrying about what people at university and in the broader art community think of you and your art? (s=216)**

\*these survey participants described times when they do and do not worry.

findings that are similarly weighted lower on the wellbeing, mental health, and resilience spectrum. The only exceptions are the findings presented in *Engagement* and *Relationship* variables, and the K6 scores. Otherwise, both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that survey participants experienced lower levels of wellbeing, despite the first short response question in the survey.

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Survey findings that indicated lower levels of wellbeing may relate to issues of participant memory bias. As explained by Seligman et al. (2005), people do not accurately indicate their state of happiness when remembering past experiences. Gable and Haidt (2005) propose that people naturally focus on, process, or retain negative information—even if they experience these negative events less frequently than positive events. Given the interview sample represents a smaller portion of the survey sample, it is possible that the survey findings are more representative of visual art students in Australia.

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“ I was thinking, I am quite an outlier here [laughs] (Louise, graphic design).

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According to the data displayed in [Table 6.4](#), a higher percentage of interview participants mentioned positive wellbeing features including positive emotions, resilience, and accomplishment.

While considering data collection methods, it is possible that the interview participants possessed positive motivations and qualities that led them to volunteer for further participation in this research. It is also possible that these participants were less inclined to report lower observable features of wellbeing, given their comments were not shared anonymously (Iarossi, 2006). The interview participants' age could also be a factor. Over half of the interview participants were older than 25 years ([Section 5.2](#)) and they potentially had greater skills in self-management and clearer goals for their future than their younger peers (Orygen, 2017).

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“ But, ultimately, it's kind of like saying to yourself “Well look, I really want to be an artist, I really love what I'm doing” and you just pick yourself up and keep going (Anne, painting).

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*In [Section 5.2.1](#), I wrote that 18 participants were motivated to be interviewed because they wanted*

*to help their peers or they wanted to help me and my research. Although this might give some indication of the interview participants' character, I cannot make conclusive statements that fully explain or represent their motivations. I welcome you to critically consider any other motivations as you continue to read.*

Five survey participants and most interview participants ( $i=25$ ) referred to how they were developing their self-management skills as they progressed with their degrees. Brendan, for example, had learnt to rest more to maintain a positive mindset, which in turn helped him be more productive with his work. Ella explained how the self-management skills she learnt during her degree had benefitted different areas of her life ([Figure 6.7](#)). Sophie observed how she was gradually understanding how her health impacted her concentration and she wanted to learn more about managing her wellbeing while still at university:

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“ Now’s a good time to do it because I have all of the support available to me. That’s just something I can carry with me through the rest of my life (Sophie, animation).

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University can provide a space for art students to learn how to manage their wellbeing while training to become professional artists ([Section 2.3](#)). As Sophie mentioned, the management strategies that art students learn during their degree can benefit them after graduation. Marylin also referred to the difference that early intervention can make, particularly for younger university students. Art degrees can therefore provide a critical space for artists to enhance their resilience, if the environment they study in accommodates this type of growth. The remaining sections in this chapter focus on the second research objective ([Section 1.2](#)), by exploring participants’ perspectives on how their educational environments could be changed to benefit art students’ wellbeing.

#### 6.4: EXPLORING THE PARTICIPANTS’ VIEWS ON CHANGE

When asked how their degree could be changed to support their wellbeing, many participants shared a diversity of creative and thoughtful suggestions. These recommendations for change were categorised into three narrative themes that will be detailed in this section. Recommendations that required a university or department-wide approach are discussed in [Section 6.4.1](#), whereas the suggested changes that are more specific to classroom and curricula change are outlined in [Section 6.4.2](#). Finally, any participants’ recommendations that focussed on industry-related training are detailed in [Section 6.4.3](#).

Some participants ( $s+i=25$ ), however, did not feel prepared to provide detailed recommendations at the time they participated in the research. These participants responded to questions about change in their degree by initially stating that they did not know how the university could support their wellbeing. Such a

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#### *Figure 6.7* *Narrative Box – How University Benefitted Ella’s Wellbeing, Despite Challenges*

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Although Ella had experienced challenging interactions with intimidating teachers, she was aware that this benefitted her learning. Ella knew that the tough feedback helped her grow by giving her a chance to switch her mindset about art and apply what she had learnt to other aspects of her life. Indeed, Ella felt a lot happier at uni, partially because of her art practice and increased independence. However, Ella was unsure if some of her teachers should be so brutal, given there was a lot of pressure on students to make connections to thrive in the industry, and she cared about what they thought of her—to the point where she almost viewed them as parental figures.

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perspective on change may relate to students having undermined confidence due to public perceptions of incapability (de Bie, 2020) which could explain why some students do not give feedback on their degree, as one academic gatekeeper and two interview participants mentioned. Alternatively, these responses could relate to the complexity of problem solving that is necessary to respectfully enhance university students' wellbeing ( $s+i=11$ ). To improve students' resilience and mental health, these participants ( $s+i=11$ ) understood that any new strategies would need to be relevant, engaging, and accommodating of each student's subjective views on their learning (Kern et al., 2019)—as discussed in the following quotes and narrative box ([Figure 6.8](#)):

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“ ... if it doesn't seem relevant to what they are doing in the course, they won't go and do it (Brendan, interactive design).

... I think it's really just a problem that's too complicated and too abstract for some poorly funded university program involving yoga or some shit to ever solve (SP 237, graphic design).

... it's very subjective to the student. Each student will prefer a different thing (Nick, digital media).

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The interview participants also raised issues regarding the way changes should be woven into the university structure. For Louise and Dale, implementing change into curricula could more frequently promote normalisation of mental health topics. Mia similarly recommended compulsory learning for students, because she lacked the motivation to seek help. Such foundational and compulsory change could benefit a variety of students, including those who may not seek ways to enhance their wellbeing at university, like participants ( $s+i=12$ ) who were not sure if their

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**Figure 6.8**  
**Narrative Box – Sophie's Views on Changing her Degree**

Sophie did not have many recommendations to change her degree because she thought her uni successfully provided what was needed. Additionally, Sophie was unsure if any other 'healing you' topics incorporated into the curriculum would be beneficial. Although Sophie enjoyed one subject that taught self-management topics, she noticed that this subject was not well received by students who ultimately found the class a waste of time. This was because, as Sophie explained, some students felt uncomfortable with talking about how to feel and think, particularly when it did not contribute to their degree outcomes. What Sophie wanted to see, however, were more constructive guest talks about how to get into her prospective industry.

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university could meet their wellbeing needs. Given wellbeing theory moves beyond the mere absence of mental or physical ill health (Seligman, 2008), further changes to curricula could also bolster the wellbeing of participants who expressed needing more support, and those (s+i=49) who were already happy with the support their university provided.

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“ I think there are quite a few support systems at university, you just need to reach out and actually use them (SP 176, drawing).

Nah, my mental health is fine (SP 202, graphic design).

I think a lot of the struggle I had within this degree stemmed from personal struggle, the degree was really just helping me to stay grounded and keep a routine (SP 188, metalsmithing).

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*I tend to agree with Louise, Dale, and Mia's opinions (above) and am mindful that certain changes may not be sustainable unless they proactively address the complexity of students' wellbeing from within the degree itself. However, there were times when I felt conflicted by this stance because not all participants shared the same opinions. As a researcher, I needed to represent participants who proposed what could be considered "band-aid" solutions (Louise, graphic design). But I also needed to challenge any personal tendencies to collude with proposed 'easy ways' of responding to students' wellbeing difficulties.*

Other participants (s+i=40) discussed areas of change that were more widespread and potentially exceeded the responsibility of the art department or support services. For example, participants (s+i=18) desired changes to the length of their degree or teaching periods, or change regarding their isolated campus. Some participants (s+i=14) generally acknowledged a need to change the cultural and social

stigma towards mental health and degrading social preconceptions of artists. Additionally, participants (s+i=12) requested change regarding the discontinuation of art courses and government funding issues that affected the university student's cost of living.

*As an example, some participants asked for the length of their degrees to be four, rather than three years. Suggestions like these can lead to rich conversations about different student (and university) values, given some students desire timely completion of their degree whereas others prefer to rigorously explore their discipline and do not mind a later completion. Although I have not overly detailed these recommendations, they are valuable and in some cases, they could be feasibly implemented (e.g., better promotion of part-time options, [Section 7.3.5](#)). However, these participant responses were mostly outside the scope of this research.*

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#### 6.4.1: THE PARTICIPANTS' DEPARTMENT-WIDE SUGGESTIONS TO ENHANCE THEIR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE AND WELLBEING

A primary issue raised by survey and interview participants ( $s+i=52$ ) was the quality and accessibility of university support services ([Section 5.3](#)). Many participants welcomed a range of changes including increased promotion and accessibility of support services during the teaching period ( $s+i=32$ ) and an overall increase in online or in-person services ( $s+i=35$ ) particularly for those frequenting isolated campuses ( $s+i=7$ ). Other participants ( $s+i=15$ ) also raised issues that suggested the need to improve disorganised, understaffed, or unprofessional support services. For example, one participant (SP 165, installation) found that the only support staff member available was too familiar with students and did not provide confidential help, whereas others ( $s=4$ ) mentioned the long wait times to receive support:

“ It’s almost as if they are trying to weed out the less sure people. By the time I do see someone, my exams will be well and truly over. (SP 244, printmaking).

If I get through to one of the counsellors on campus, I often feel they are ill-equipped to deal with more intense diagnoses (SP 228, printmaking).

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Not all recommendations focussed on support services responding to students' current mental health issues. Some participants suggested more enabling strategies such as providing free gym facilities ( $s+i=2$ ) or providing online platforms where students could seek wellbeing support specific to their industry or university-related challenges—with the option of doing so anonymously ( $s+i=5$ ). One survey participant (SP 104, textiles) also suggested a compulsory counsellor session for students which, despite perhaps being challenging for some students, could provide a space for them to acquire

different self-management skills or discuss any mental health concerns they have.

When considering the limited opportunities for art students to build supportive networks, participants ( $s+i=46$ ) raised a variety of creative solutions. These proposed solutions ranged from introducing peer-led art groups or social clubs ( $s+i=15$ ) to providing a space for both peers and university staff to relate on a more personal level ( $s+i=22$ ) and talking about the challenges they experience with their degree ( $s+i=9$ ). Other participants ( $s+i=23$ ) endorsed relaxing and fun activities that are always available, or are available during an organised day or week-long break held during an ideal time of the teaching period. The fun activities listed by participants included swings, puzzles, acrylic pouring, painting, weaving, movies, or camps that students pay for to attend.

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“ ... encouraging more of those social connections would help to sustain that

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sort of network outside of uni. Like, after uni (Caroline, sculpture).

Fostering a better sense of community within the arts sector in a university setting may allow for a better sense that people can help each other (SP 232, drawing).

I'd benefit from teachers making a bit of an effort to build a relationship with students which isn't just purely transactional (in the sense of giving and receiving knowledge) (SP 52, drawing).

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Some participant recommendations related to the administrative aspects of their degree. Jane, for example, desired more access to equipment, which related to another survey participant (SP 215, painting) who could not afford art supplies and proposed that these supplies were included in the course fees. For other participants ( $s+i=25$ ), better availability and quality of communication

regarding their enrolment and course structure was considered valuable. This improvement could potentially help students who were unaware that they could change their type of attendance to part-time ( $s+i=2$ ), students who were not consulted when their degree structure was altered ( $s+i=3$ ), or students who desired more information about subject content and how the subjects were interconnected ( $s+i=19$ ). Seven participants ( $s+i=7$ ), also recommended external learning options or recordings of their classes to help students manage their wellbeing<sup>24</sup>.

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“ Sometimes we wake up in the middle of the night and we feel our most creative, enthusiastic selves but we've got a 9am lecture that isn't being recorded so we need to go .... It would be great if the university did offer an alternative (Ava, interactive design).

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24. These needs may have been met since universities transitioned exclusively to online learning in response to COVID-19 (Section 7.3.1).

The participants viewed the support services, teaching staff, and practicing artists as likely candidates for teaching art students to manage their wellbeing. Some of these participants ( $s+i=54$ ) referred to curricula, extracurricular, and co-curricular subjects or workshops that could be designed specifically for art students to learn a range of skills. Many of these skills ( $s+i=36$ ) were focussed around creative practice and included topics such as how to be creative, how to manage creative blocks, creative thinking and expression, processing and responding to criticism (Figure 6.9), and creative confidence. Additionally, participants proposed further training to improve their motivation and time management skills ( $s+i=10$ ), and how to cope with relevant challenges to improve their wellbeing ( $s+i=27$ ).

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“ [Art can be used] to build up mental resilience first .... I think they need to talk about that early on in the game, what the benefits are of actually being

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**Figure 6.9**

**Narrative Box – Anne’s Experience with Student Feedback Sessions**

Anne found it very helpful to participate in class feedback sessions. These sessions invited students to introduce their work to the class along with one problem they needed to solve, thus engaging students in brainstorming and problem-solving. Anne believes that sessions like this—and a first-year psychology-based subject—could help art students develop resilience and learn how to receive criticism by using their peers’ feedback to improve their work.

creative and doing creative things ... (James, painting).

If there was a unit that was designed to explain mental health issues within the context of visual art. Not the typical high school mental health class that listed out the symptoms in a clinical and detached manner (SP 133, studio practice).

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The participants’ responses (s+i=40) also suggested that students can benefit from staff being trained in topics pertaining to mental health, including help-seeking processes and stigma (s+i=13). This training could increase teachers’ mental health literacy and help them identify times when students could benefit from reminders about the support services available (s+i=13). Furthermore, the training could prevent any behaviour discussed by participants (s+i=23) that greatly impacted the learning of students who were feeling distressed, or students in minority groups including those with mental

or physical disabilities, international students, and mature age students. These participant responses thus indicated a need for teachers to foster a greater respect and understanding of students’ wellbeing and, at times, lenience towards their study and workload:

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“ Sometimes I think they act like the students are burdening them and that makes me a bit afraid to approach them (SP 200, Painting student).

I find it most difficult when I am struggling with my mental health to explain to my tutors the situation out of fear of being accused of making excuses (SP 206, drawing).

Just the language that is sometimes used can be a bit insensitive. I’m not expecting everyone to be 100% politically correct or anything like that. Just mindful. (Louise, graphic design).

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More support of different ways of learning .... Needs a serious rework for neurodiverse students (SP 236, painting).

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#### 6.4.2: THE PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS TO ENHANCE CURRICULA AND WELLBEING

When recommending ways to improve art students' wellbeing, participants ( $s+i=112$ ) raised curriculum-related topics that impacted their wellbeing. Many of these comments were about the organisation and administration of assessment. In total, 15 participants ( $s+i=15$ ) recommended that more care be taken to intersperse assessment deadlines across the teaching period, to help students manage multiple deadlines. Other participants ( $s+i=19$ ) suggested changes regarding the weighting and pacing of assessment, to coincide with more reasonably paced content delivery. As discussed in [Section 6.4.1](#), the participant responses indicated a need for teaching staff to be more

respectful of the time it takes for students to learn and produce assessment submissions while managing external work and family obligations.

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“ All of our major projects for all the different subjects are due on the same day at the beginning of the exam period. This makes that week the most stressful ever (SP 140, graphic design).

Stop setting so many regular deadlines that include so much to be done in so little time when nothing has been taught or learnt. It's like walking in a dark stadium trying to find a needle in the grass (SP 1, graphic design).

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Further recommendations related to student assessment included criteria and marking. For example, participants ( $s+i=3$ ) desired

more creative flexibility with their assessment and others ( $s+i=20$ ) saw opportunities for their assessment or classroom tasks to be focussed on positive topics about resilience and wellbeing. Better clarity of assessment criteria was discussed by participants ( $s+i=10$ ) and three other participant ( $s+i=3$ ) stressed that the criteria needed to be provided well before the due date. Some participants ( $s+i=7$ ) recommended more standardisation of teaching and grading across the subjects in their degree, and more acceptance towards students who had different creative tastes and styles ( $s+i=11$ ).

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“ ... acceptance of different styles of art would be a step in the right direction (SP 135, interactive design).

Having more than one teacher assess the work is therefore a very good way of avoiding bias ... (SP 12, sculpture).

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To improve students' experience with assessment, participants (s+i=4) proposed further flexibility and management of assessment outcomes. For two of these survey participants, a chance to opt for alternative assessment rather than in-class presentations could improve their learning and wellbeing. The participants also focused on facilitation of group assessment and activities (s+i=9). These responses covered strategies to manage unfair circumstances by providing less graded group work or reducing the amount of group assessment in the final year. Although Ella viewed group activities and assessment as valuable for fostering a creative community, Tina wanted group assessment to be omitted from curricula entirely, whereas Louise proposed the application of more thoughtful approaches to encourage positive and fair group work:

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“ ... I feel like if you're putting in all of this time and effort and money into a degree, what you get out of it should be more representative of your

abilities than what you can get from certain group assignments (Louise, graphic design).

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Various participants (s+i=31) recommended further opportunities to be taught creative skills. More in-class, block-mode, or external and voluntary training was desired by these students to learn fundamental software or practical skills that could benefit their creative work (s+i=11). Additionally, participants requested more balance between theory and practical learning (s+i=25) with more in-class training and creative application of the theory learnt (s+i=13). This creative application could provide students with further opportunity to enjoy the benefits of their creative expression (s+i=9).

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“ I would then suggest that considering it is an art degree, the tasks could be more creative and encourage more creativity in class and not just a final

product for an assignment (SP 79, graphic design).

Maybe not so much pressure on coming up with a fantastic concept all the time, and focus on process and technique (SP 123, painting).

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*I have benefitted from spending my own time making certain theory-heavy tasks more creatively engaging. As a teacher, I have previously heard students refer to certain subjects as 'good' because they 'get to do something' that contributes to their portfolio. However, this does not negate the importance of aesthetic inquiry and philosophy. I am grateful for participants who shared their alternate views on the benefits of continual creative practice. These views included students feeling pressured due to time restrictions (Weida, 2016), students not pursuing a creative career, or students who felt uncomfortable about regularly producing creative work in the classroom.*

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In addition to further creative training, participants also requested more contact and mentoring support from their teachers ( $s+i=24$ ). These requests ranged from teacher consultations outside class hours to class check-ins regarding students' progress with their assessment or their degree. Potentially, teachers could benefit from these mentoring relationships if students were inclined to give constructive feedback about their degree during check-ins ( $s+i=2$ ). Such additional contact and individualised learning could be better facilitated if the teachers were remunerated for their work, and perhaps had the option to reduce the size of their class ( $s+i=6$ ).

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“ Just the smaller classes, you get a lot of one-on-one time with your teachers (Ava, interactive design). ”

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Various participant recommendations ( $s+i=35$ ) referred to time pressures that affected their wellbeing ( $s+i=35$ ). For example, participants

**Figure 6.10**  
**Narrative Box – Andrew’s Views on having Small Classes**

To foster a more supportive peer community, Andrew proposed that universities reduce their class sizes. Andrew believed that reduced class sizes would increase the potential for students to form stronger bonds, thus giving them opportunities to engage more in student critiques before submitting their assessment. As Andrew posited, forming these stronger support groups could help students mitigate stressors when they encountered challenges at uni.

( $s+i=3$ ) proposed that the timetabling of classes be shifted to reasonable hours of the day, to benefit students who needed to travel long distances from home to campus. Other participants ( $s+i=26$ ) raised issues regarding compulsory subjects that did not seem relevant

to their learning at all, or subjects that should be emphasised or extended throughout the degree because they were essential for student learning. These issues revealed a need for further scrutiny of subject content and degree structure using current student feedback. Furthermore, these issues highlighted the value and necessity for information sharing and orientation with students, to explain the reasons for their learning challenges and experiences.

**6.4.3: THE PARTICIPANTS’ INDUSTRY-FOCUSSED RECOMMENDATIONS**

As outlined in [Section 5.8](#), many participants raised concerns about the future. It is therefore no wonder that some participants ( $s+i=46$ ) requested further, more relevant preparation and advice about career pathways. This preparation, as some participants suggested ( $s+i=28$ ), could be covered by delivering various career management topics in class. For example, participants mentioned topics such as maintaining work and life balance, maintaining creativity in the field, writing grant proposals,

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negotiating payment, seeking work, and managing other industry-related challenges.

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“ If I was taught how to be an effective freelancer and how to contact potential employers I think I would feel a lot more secure in my future (SP 114, graphic design).

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*As a researcher, I can see the value of students discussing different psychological methods to manage uncertainty and how this could benefit their preparation for the workforce. However, such conversations could be received very differently by other students, depending on the power dynamics that exist between the facilitator and the students. There is potential for students to view these topics as uncomfortable or irrelevant (Section 6.4).*

For some participants (s+i=28), better industry-related preparation could be provided by university staff. Participants (s+i=4) thought it would be helpful

to explore different art practitioners' successes and failures. Additionally, one survey participant (SP 51, drawing) recommended that teachers discuss alternative jobs that students could acquire from their degree, such as teaching or therapy positions. Some participants (s+i=17) also suggested further career guidance and professional development that was specific to their industry. Finally, participants (s+i=6) referred to the varied artist and academic roles of teachers (Weida, 2016) by proposing a better balance of teachers who were either current practitioners or were trained academics with some experience in the field.

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“ Our teachers are also just ex-students of the uni, which means we don't get any points of view from outside our school (SP 87, animation).

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*As a younger sessional teacher, I have felt self-conscious about my limited experience as an art practitioner. I have navigated this challenge by*

*having open conversations with students about my limited experience and organising more industry-focussed interactions through guest lectures and field trips. My lack of experience as a practicing artist potentially drives my focus on industry-related recommendations and shapes the way I have perceived these participant responses.*

One way for students to acquire points of view from the workforce is through work experience ([Section 2.4.1](#)). To help students feel more confident with their future participants requested various ways to acquire this experience. For example, participants (s+i=12) requested compulsory internships or subjects with work experience incorporated into the assessment. In response to being asked when these types of subjects could be delivered, Nick posited that students should be asked to acquire work experience early in their degree, whereas three other interview participants maintained that it would be better delivered later in the degree when students had time to develop and demonstrate their creative skills:

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“ More real experience earlier on, I think. Definitely .... It's going to push them to come to terms with themselves. Realistic terms. Which I think would be a good thing (Nick, digital media).

I'd say towards the end because you're more comfortable and confident with yourself (Susan, animation).

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As Riley mentioned, other types of contact with the industry, such as guest speakers, may be more comfortably delivered early in students' degrees. The recommendation for guest speakers was championed by participants (s+i=17) to help them understand the challenges art graduates and practitioners experience, and the coping strategies they use to manage these challenges. These guest speaking sessions could facilitate more detailed stories about how artists attained their job, and also provide opportunities for art practitioners to see students' work (Riley, game design). For

Sophie, the direction that guest speakers took with their presentation was important:

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“ But I never really found those talks very helpful because it was someone just coming in and bragging about all the work they do. But I didn't really get any information on the industry (Sophie, animation).

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*When considering these recommendations, I wondered if guest speakers would feel comfortable sharing information about their coping strategies, even if the strategies did not positively impact their wellbeing. Such conversations, I thought, could lead to vulnerable and potentially distressing conversations that would need to be facilitated with care. Although these conversations could help students identify strategies that are maladaptive, they could also reinforce views that certain maladaptive coping is beneficial.*

*Regardless of these possibilities, I needed to challenge my thinking. After all, who am I to decide what coping strategies work best for other individuals?*

Other participants suggested online resources, field trips, and networking as other ways to connect with their industry. Five interview participants mentioned an active online platform for students to receive event invitations, job openings, and to keep connected with one another. Field trips to local studios or firms were also proposed (s+i=2) to provide an opportunity for artists to discuss their step-by-step processes during an average day at work (i=2). Alternatively, participants could benefit from networking events such as industry nights to help them better connect with their art community and practise socialising with art practitioners (s+i=20). This is despite the views of one survey participant, who described learning “how to schmooze” useless (SP 236, painting).

**Figure 6.11**

**Narrative Box – Kerry’s Recommendations for Change**

When reflecting on her past work and study experiences in different fields, Kerry found that people often misunderstood how difficult and time-consuming creating can be. This was particularly relevant for training artists who felt uncertain about the expectations of their creative output. When completing assessment, Kerry found the criteria often positioned her as both the client and the creative practitioner. To take out half of the stress, Kerry proposed that students receive assessment criteria that was altered to follow industry standards. This could be achieved by providing students with information that clients would typically give to artists, rather than asking the students to develop the information themselves.

“ There needs to be more interaction between actual artists .... even just to go around to some businesses that do art .... That’d probably be really good for a lot of students (Jasper, new media).

The participants also highlighted further opportunities for their teachers to support their preparation for the future, such as the example in [Figure 6.11](#). These recommendations revealed participants’ desire to know their own teacher’s work history and self-management (s+i=3). Furthermore, these responses highlighted opportunities for classroom discussion about the culture of the creative industries and the pressure art students experience when successfully securing work (s+i=14). As one survey participant (SP 239, painting) claimed, both industry members and teachers need to openly communicate with students to understand the breadth of challenges and successes that are experienced at university:

“ ... more understanding from staff and employers of what [it] is actually like to be a uni student at this time (SP 239, painting).

**6.5: CONCLUDING THE DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS**

The previously discussed findings present a descriptive wellbeing needs assessment of visual art students enrolled in higher education ([Section 1.2](#)). The purpose of this chapter and [Chapter 5](#), was to illuminate the unique ways that these students managed their wellbeing during university life, and to explore different prevention or intervention strategies that could enhance their wellbeing. By integrating different quantitative and qualitative data, a descriptive dashboard outlining participants’ wellbeing needs was achieved. At times, the quantitative survey scores enhanced the findings by providing insights that the qualitative survey data could not ([Section 6.3](#)). Conversely, the qualitative interview and

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survey data expanded the depth and breadth of the survey scores by describing contexts that impacted the wellbeing of participants.

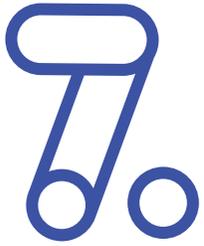
Although there were many instances of silence and partial agreement between quantitative and qualitative data, there was no complete disagreement. Notable silences occurred when qualitative survey or interview responses from some participants did not appear in the narrative themes or wellbeing domains. These occurrences could be due to the purpose and nature of the qualitative data collection methods, as discussed in [Section 6.3](#). While acknowledging these silences, similar findings from the survey scales surfaced when exploring observable features of wellbeing in the survey short response and interview data. These findings describe many visual art students with lower levels of resilience and wellbeing, except for certain features of wellbeing such as engagement.

*The scope of creative disciplines that I researched was somewhat restricted by my*

*purposeful selection criterion ([Section 3.5.1](#)). I privileged certain art students in this research because of my familiarity and interest in their disciplines, which ultimately limits the findings. As a result, other artists such as photographers, writers, and performing artists were not included in this research. Even though the opinions of other artists have been excluded in this research, I acknowledge that their voices are highly relevant and necessary for future implementation of wellbeing interventions ([Section 8.5](#)).*

Transformative research demands reflection on the participants' perspectives of reality, and ways to help them realise social action (Kamanzi, 2011). The previously discussed recommendations for change in [Section 6.4](#) provide a rich collection of creative ideas to help key university stakeholders, art departments, and broader communities bolster the wellbeing of visual art students. These ideas also provide ways to better equip art students with the tools they need to empower

their own self-management at university. The following chapter provides a compiled collection of these potentially effective and sustainable recommendations for change.



# DISCUSSION *and Recommendations*

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## 7.1: SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

In the previous two chapters, participants' wellbeing needs relevant to their Australian higher education have been described. These mixed findings have highlighted times when participants reported negative features of wellbeing in response to certain aspects of their university education. The findings also uncovered times when art students demonstrated positive features of wellbeing, including specific strengths, while managing their wellbeing. This chapter will begin to draw from some findings by first situating them in the context of extant research literature, to highlight insights about visual art students' educational experiences ([Section 7.2](#)). Next, the findings will be expanded on through the presentation of research recommendations, to help universities facilitate creative learning that supports and enhances students wellbeing ([Section 7.3](#)). Finally, the significance of the research recommendations in relation to the recent impacts of COVID-19 will be discussed in [Section 7.4](#).

## 7.2: SITUATING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS IN THE LITERATURE

The combined quantitative and qualitative research findings indicate that this sample of visual art students reported lower levels of resilience and wellbeing ([Section 6.5](#)). Although this research was designed to describe participants' wellbeing needs rather than identify compromised mental health ([Section 1.2](#)), the findings are consistent with research literature that found Australian university students experience elevated levels of mental health difficulties (Rickwood et al., 2017). The qualitative findings also provide supporting evidence that Australian visual art students experience similar challenges to students in different study areas. These challenges include managing emotional and social commitments, financial obligations, time pressures, high performance expectations, deteriorating administration and teaching conditions, poor health, loneliness or isolation, and mismanaged or limited

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wellbeing support provided by university staff and services.<sup>[25]</sup>

The qualitative findings also support research literature that discusses the challenges art students can experience during their creative learning ([Section 2.4](#)). These challenges sometimes related to art students' personal link with their artwork, which at times reflected a vulnerability to criticism due to students' individualised ideas and creative identity ([Section 5.7](#); Lindström, 2015; Seton & Trouton, 2014). Some participants ([Section 5.7](#)) indicated this personal link with their art practice while discussing the lack of standardised work trajectories. Their responses thus contribute to existing knowledge about the precarity of the creative industries ([Section 2.4.2](#)) and identify how students worry about not being good

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25. The challenges listed here are supported by most literature outlined in [Section 2.2](#). For an overview of university student challenges highlighted in the literature, see Carter et al. (2017). For Australian student perspectives on the challenges they experience, see Baik et al. (2019).

enough to enter the arts workforce. Additional findings that are consistent with creative art literature<sup>[26]</sup> relates to social misconceptions, or devaluing social positioning that impacts students' university experiences, help-seeking, preparation for work, and future experience as art practitioners ([Section 5.9](#)). To elaborate on further challenges that participants experienced, research recommendations addressing these challenges are presented in [Section 7.3](#).

Positive features of participants' wellbeing were also revealed in the mixed findings, including higher levels of engagement ([Section 6.3](#)). These results are consistent with other research literature that reported art students as having high learner engagement (QILT, 2019a), potentially because they enjoy the emancipating process of making art (McDonald, 2008). Some participants specifically mentioned

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26. For example, see Brien and Webb (2008), Daniel (2016b), Gwinner et al. (2009), Johnson et al. (2015), Lee (2019), Lindauer (2011), Orr and Shreeve (2017), Rothenberg (2001), and Schlesinger (2009).

how making art helped them cope with negative emotions ([Section 6.2.2](#)). This explains how creative processes help some students regulate their emotions (Coholic et al., 2012; Van Lith, 2016). However, participants did not always have access to therapeutic strategies despite the creative nature of their degree, because they were hampered by external pressures and commitments (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; Brodericka, 2011; Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014).

To realise social transformation (Mertens, 2009a, 2015) and sustainable wellbeing intervention (Seton & Trouton, 2014), it is important to understand art student and teacher relations. The qualitative research findings revealed that visual art students experience power imbalances and conflict with their art department or teachers' values, particularly during unfair or uncomfortable in-class conversations, critiques, and assessment grading (Clarke & Cripps, 2012; Orr & Shreeve, 2017). When Dylan ([Figure 5.6](#)) and Ella ([Figure 6.7](#)) experienced harsh

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criticism from their teachers, they respectfully accepted their teachers' opinions and found the experience valuable (Seton & Trouton, 2014) with some indication that they became more active and engaged students (Matthews et al., 2018). However, at times Dylan and Ella expressed doubt about the necessity of their teachers' harsh behaviour, which revealed how teachers can enable or disable students' mutual trust, state of flow, and confidence (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014):

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“ I don't think I have any problem with the way she did it, I think. I'm quite proud of myself, the fact that I didn't let that affect me too much .... But .... I don't feel confident in myself enough to give a good response (Ella, painting).

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Not all participants were motivated to enhance their university experience ([Section 6.4](#); White, 2007), while others showed active engagement in seeking out positive solutions. Evidence of

student agency emerged in the qualitative data when participants spoke about navigating ambiguous criteria with their teachers (Orr & Shreeve, 2017), their engagement with peer learning (Budge et al., 2013), and reconstruction of their creative identity in response to other education-related challenges (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018). One example of this was when Tina invested time in building supportive relationships with her teachers ([Figure 5.2](#)). Tina's agency in this example was inspired by her interview with the researcher, which implies that students can benefit from reflecting on questions such as those that were asked during the data collection, as one survey participant proposed when considering ways to improve their education:

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“ ... to talk to or know there is someone available to discuss the above relevant queries with (SP 137, printmaking).

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Respectfully positioning art students as dignified producers of change can empower them to engage further in their education (Gibson, 2010). This aligns with social justice rationales for student agency, where all students have a right to establish inclusive learning environments (Bovill et al., 2011; Healey et al., 2016). By identifying relevant ways that students used their agency to bounce back from university challenges, this research can help inform the development of effective and sustainable wellbeing interventions ([Section 3.3](#)). However, the heterogeneous coping techniques outlined in the qualitative findings ([Section 6.2](#)) provide a clear reminder that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to helping Australian artists cope with challenges (Eynde et al., 2016; Mentally Healthy, 2020). Instead, university interventions need to be diverse and multi-levelled to reflect the multifaceted wellbeing needs of students (Amuna, 2016; Larcombe & Fethers, 2013).

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### 7.3: THE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This research supports the stance that universities are ideally positioned to foster positive wellbeing change for students ([Section 2.1](#); Wynaden et al., 2013). To further address the primary objectives of this research ([Section 1.2](#)) and seek positive change, the findings will now be situated as evidence-based recommendations to improve and sustain Australian visual art students' wellbeing through their higher education. These recommendations have been categorised into five subsections that are summarised in [Table 7.1](#) below. Each category is presented in order of most mentioned to least mentioned by participants. This order does not negate the importance of each recommendation.

The recommendations presented in the following subsections are shaped by participants' perspectives. Although these visual art students are primarily responsible for their wellbeing, their efforts to improve their university experience can be disempowered or hindered by existing

educational systems ([Section 3.2](#)). To support and empower students' development as agents of change, this research acknowledges the need for a collaborative, whole-of-university approach. The following proposed recommendations thus require identification of who can shift or reposition their power to cultivate active transformation. This active change should involve all members of the Australian higher education community (Orygen, 2020a) including key stakeholders, administrative staff, art teachers, support services, art practitioners, art graduates, and the visual art students themselves.

As identified by this research and other research literature ([Section 6.4.1](#); Houghton, 2016) creative curricula can reinforce discriminatory power structures. To emancipate visual art students from harmful power structures, educational reform needs to accommodate students' diverse voices—including disagreement and dissent (de Bie, 2020)—regarding their university experience. Involving students in decision-making processes can lead to more responsive interventions that

meet students' wellbeing needs (Baik et al., 2019). The students' voices are key to constructing respectful and empowering discourses (Busher, 2012) and are a key determinant of educational reform success (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Cook-Sather et al., 2018). By intentionally positioning students as partners whose voices are seriously considered, university staff can nurture students' sense of inclusion, belonging, agency, and empowerment during their undergraduate degree (Bovill et al., 2011; Kiester & Holowko, 2020).

This research supports Students as Partners, a transformative learning practice and research approach that has emerged in Australian higher education (Matthews et al., 2018). The Students as Partners approach advocates for collaboration between staff and students to challenge power imbalances and transform traditional teaching models (Cook-Sather et al., 2018). Such meaningful relationships are ideal for reinforcing any change proposed by the following research recommendations, and could include frequent brainstorming sessions and collection of student

**Table 7.1**

*Five Recommendation Categories*

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**Section 7.3.1: Reassess current curricula** within the context of current student demographics and feedback, industry standards, and research on wellbeing intervention. Explore the capacity for curricula to be explicitly coherent, transparent, and supportive of subject and course learning objectives and graduate attributes. Examine the interspersion, facilitation, and grading of assessment. Assess how students are supported when they experience ambiguity. Examine the inclusion of content that supports student wellbeing, distributes power, and prevents uncomfortably evocative, discriminatory, or disengaging content.

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**Section 7.3.2: Increase support and training for university staff.** Improve support service accessibility and services, provide specialised support for art students and online services. Explore ways to improve communication between professional support staff and teachers. Increase care and support for university staff, including teachers. Increase training for teachers in topics such as developing and maintaining teaching philosophy and identity, understanding how teacher beliefs and values can impact students, developing or maintaining organisational and teaching skills, and navigating student-teacher power relations.

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**Section 7.3.3: Implement wellbeing-enabling intervention into curricula.** Weave wellbeing and resilience topics relevant to the visual art student experience ([Table 7.2](#)) into curricula, co-curricular activities, or other forms of creative learning. Ensure that wellbeing-promoted learning is meaningful, relevant, empowering, and focussed on increasing visual art student agency; well-justified, research-led, and evaluated; aligned with learning objectives; and integrated into the curriculum at various stages of the degree. Provide more opportunities for students to practice their art during class and through assessment.

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**Section 7.3.4: Foster creative communities through peer and industry engagement.** Develop a supportive, accessible, inclusive, and well-equipped space for visual art students to cultivate peer communities, engage in creative practice, and collaborate. Encourage students' engagement in curricula or co-curricular teamwork activities. Decrease any resistance towards social clubs. Increase peer mentoring, peer feedback, and panel discussions about the university experience. Improve management of group assessment. Increase industry engagement through guest visits, field trips, and networking events potentially organised by final-year students. Frequently share industry news including relevant events and work opportunities. Facilitate career check-ins, work experience opportunities, and career management training.



**Section 7.3.5: Clarify student expectations of their degree.** Provide clear and open communication about key lessons and the culture that commencing art students will experience. Discuss the teacher's duty of care, student conduct, and other learning responsibilities. Highlight the values and aspects of creative learning that are prioritised within each creative degree, with explanations of the type of assessment students will encounter, and further interpretations of the learning objectives and graduate attributes, by using language with which novice learners can identify.

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perspectives to inspire authentic relinquishment of controls that disempower student agency. However, student partnerships need to be critically and cautiously approached to nurture sustainable progress (de Bie, 2020; Matthews et al., 2019) and reinterpret any potential discomfort experienced by students and staff in the process (Bovill et al., 2011; Seton & Trouton, 2014).

The final, key finding that pertains to all research recommendations is the necessity for a clear understanding of visual art students' learning experience. University interventions, or preventative measures designed to enhance visual art students' resilience, must be relevant to students' study motivations and creative aspirations. As the findings indicate ([Section 6.4](#)), the culture and various contexts of each university impact the varied educational and wellbeing needs of students (Brooker et al., 2019). There are also many factors external to students' time at university that can impact their wellbeing ([Section 5.2.2](#)). It is therefore important that, as an initial step, university

staff also identify their art students' unique demographics, wellbeing needs, and opinions of the current curriculum before they implement any strategies for positive change. To increase the sustainability of wellbeing interventions, it is also important that staff draw from already existing policy, resources, and practices with which students are familiar (Brooker et al., 2019). Resources such as the Enhancing Student Wellbeing handbook (Baik et al., 2017) can provide additional guidance for implementing positive transformation.

As presented in [Table 7.1](#), the following subsections will address different research recommendations to enhance visual art student wellbeing at university. [Section 7.3.1](#) will first outline areas of curricula that can be reassessed to improve students' learning experiences. Following these recommendations, [Section 7.3.2](#) proposes ways to increase support and training for university staff. Ways to implement wellbeing-enabling strategies into curricula are recommended in [Section 7.3.3](#), and suggestions

to foster creative communities on campus are detailed in [Section 7.3.4](#). Finally, ways to clarify student expectations of their degree are discussed in [Section 7.3.5](#).

### 7.3.1: REASSESS CURRENT CURRICULA

Similar to other Australian university students (Baik et al., 2019), the participants' recommendations often did not extend beyond their administrator or teacher's professional role. Instead, their views on improving the wellbeing of visual art students often related to the administrative and educational skills of staff. In many cases, the participant responses suggested a need for university staff, including senior staff in art departments, to interrogate their curriculum within a wellbeing framework. Rather than developing complete and immediate redesigns of curricula, this research proposes a continued evaluation of how curricula respond to students' wellbeing needs, and endorsement of change in manageable increments (Brooker et al., 2019; Kern et al., 2019). To assist in the evaluation of art curricula, the following recommendations will refer to specific areas that emerged from the mixed findings.

Visual art students can benefit from curricula that are more explicitly coherent

**Figure 7.1**

*Summary of Recommendations to Reassess Current Curricula*



and transparent ([Section 6.4.2](#)). This can be achieved by reassessing and clarifying the purpose, interconnectedness, and meaningful organisation of curricula with attention to both subject and course learning outcomes, and graduate attributes. The collective efforts of staff to provide coherent and organised curricula across each year level may reassure visual art students and help them focus their attention

#### Reassess current curricula to ensure:

Subjects are explicitly coherent, transparent, and supportive of the teaching structure;

Assessment is interspersed, facilitated, and graded fairly;

Ambiguous teaching strategies do not negatively impact student wellbeing; and

Teaching supports wellbeing, distributes power, and prevents uncomfortably evocative, discriminatory, or disengaging content.

on other important aspects of their education (Haugnes & Russell, 2016). Clear assessment criteria helps students “focus their creative energy by taking away the anxiety that arises from wondering whether they have done the assignment correctly” (Haugnes & Russell, 2016, para. 48). Given art students highly value the way they are assessed (Houghton, 2016), providing deadlines that are interspersed throughout

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the teaching period, and the early delivery of assessment criteria, aids student self-management and preparation for their assessment tasks (Baik et al., 2019; Brooker et al., 2019).

Grading tools can be used to redistribute power to students by helping them understand educational expectations (Haugnes & Russell, 2016; Stevens & Levi, 2013). However, this research found that assessment and grading is sometimes inflexible and does not always cater to the unique learning processes of students ([Section 6.4.2](#); Gibson, 2010). To address this, Gibson (2010) proposed using innovative assessment options that are supported by grading teams or academic partnerships, and an openness to students who negotiate alternative and creative ways to deliver their assessment. Given students view assessment as a strong reflection of their self-worth ([Section 5.9](#); Cloonan, 2008), teachers should ideally examine how they support students by maintaining transparency about grading procedures, providing formative

assessment (Black & William, 2009), and using effective feedback and rigorous moderation sessions (Vardi, 2013). Furthermore, teachers can evaluate how their feedback encourages students' positive association of mistakes or failure with learning and creative development (Marks & Wade, 2015; Smith & Henriksen, 2016).

Art curricula often include ambiguity to encourage the student's creative exploration, risk-taking, and development of creative resilience (Mindel, 2018; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). However, without careful facilitation and support, ambiguous tasks can negatively impact students' wellbeing ([Section 5.7](#); Haugnes & Russell, 2016; Martin, 2016). The participants' comments revealed that a decrease in studio-based models and increase in standardised and fast delivery of content in large classes (Clarke & Budge, 2010; Frankham, 2006) made students feel unsupported, overwhelmed, and frustrated by their ambiguous and incoherent criteria. It is therefore pertinent for teachers to assess if their criteria finds the 'sweet spot' between structure

and actionable uncertainty (Beghetto, in press; Greene et al., 2019; Sawyer, 2019). Assessment criteria requires early milestones to help students focus on early experimentation and iteration, as well as ample time for students to grow accustomed to immersion in ambiguity, varying levels of complexity to address student competency, and timely assistance (Anderson et al., 2020; Beghetto, 2018; Sawyer, 2019).

Staff can enhance student learning experiences, by examining how each classroom task accommodates the diversity of student mental and physical capability. Given students are novices at the beginning of each subject, they will likely benefit from teaching principles and frameworks such as Constructive alignment (Biggs, 2012) and Load Reduction Instruction (Martin & Evans, 2019). Constructive alignment across each degree seeks to engage students in higher cognitive level processes without discrimination, through consistent and rigorous alignment of curricula with defined learning objectives (Biggs, 2012). Load Reduction

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Instruction reduces cognitive burden through appropriate instructional support, guided practice, feedback-feedforward processes, segmenting large tasks, and facilitating more demanding and independent learning for students who have acquired expertise (Martin, 2016; Martin & Evans, 2019).

In addition to teaching frameworks and principles, university staff can consider how blended learning may be used to enhance the student experience. Online learning options like live stream and recorded lectures help students manage their learning ([Section 6.4.1](#)) although some participants found online tutorials difficult when learning fundamental creative skills ([Section 5.8](#)). In response to COVID-19, most Australian universities transitioned exclusively to online learning, and it is likely blended learning and digital services will prevail as online university engagement becomes more sophisticated (Dreamson, 2020; Murgatroyd, 2020; Tjia et al., 2020). To accommodate any new modes of blended learning and instruction, this research

recommends that university staff remain mindful of how long students are expected to pay attention to class content without appropriate seating or break times, particularly for those who are unable to stand or focus for long periods.

As mentioned in [Section 7.3](#), collaborative student-staff partnerships can enable further examination of how current curricula support student wellbeing (Bovill et al., 2011). Frequently involving students—and when pertinent, art graduates and art practitioners—as reviewers or co-creators of curricula could provide valuable and heterogeneous insights about protecting visual art students' mental health. For example, student partnerships could help teachers further understand the impact of hidden curriculum messages (Hjelde, 2020), respectfully facilitate student learning in response to uncomfortable evocative content (Carello & Butler, 2015; Daddow & Schneider, 2017), or address curriculum biases that are discriminatory (Gunn, 2020; Houghton, 2016). Further insights from students, graduates, and art practitioners could help university staff

align their curriculum with current student goals and workforce conditions (Haukka, 2011), to increase authenticity and encourage meaningful community engagement ([Section 7.3.3](#)).

The mixed research findings revealed that participants' engagement is a strength ([Section 7.2](#)) that visual art students could capitalise on to enhance their wellbeing. However, participants also expressed worry that they were incapable of achieving higher grades or their creative ambitions ([Section 5.7](#)). This fear of failure prevents student engagement with experimental learning and practice (Choi et al., 2019; Mindel, 2018) as Maddison observed:

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“ ... they kind of forget to think outside of the box because they're scared maybe .... It's a very tricky thing, it's almost the same as saying, "I'm scared of expressing who I am." (Maddison, new media).

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To help students achieve a state of flow and potentially manage their stress (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009; King et al., 2016b) university staff could consider how the curriculum might shift students' focus away from meeting assessment requirements, to being more frequently engaged in the act of creating (McDonald, 2008). Increased levels of engagement could also be achieved by incorporating 'real world' vocational practice ([Section 7.4](#)) alongside learning activities that encourage play and experimentation (Orr & Shreeve, 2017).

Students risk becoming disengaged when they are asked to participate in novel tasks without possessing automated and fluent skills or knowledge (Martin & Evans, 2019). This was evident in the accounts of some participants ([Section 5.6](#)), who experienced difficulty when independently learning technical and manual skills, or who felt ill-equipped with the skills necessary to meet their creative goals. Such evidence relates to other Australian research that identified art students as less satisfied with the

generic skills they acquired through their degree (QILT, 2018, 2019a, 2019c) and literature that describes art students as feeling underprepared for their art careers (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2015). The uncertainty that participants felt about their future sometimes made them feel out of control or demotivated ([Section 5.8](#); Bridgstock, 2011; LIP, 2020). Hence, university staff could explore ways to increase student motivation by providing the foundational techniques and manual skills that students need to confidently transition into independent creative learning.

Visual art students often prefer visual or kinaesthetic learning and sometimes find critical theory difficult to learn (Blackler, 2014; Raein, 2004; Roxburgh & Caratti, 2018). Although some participants discussed the importance of learning foundational theory, others described how the way theory was taught drastically hindered their ability to create ([Section 5.8](#)). It is therefore prudent for university staff to examine if their students' learning experiences could be improved by considering the cognitive load of the theory

taught (Martin & Evans, 2019) and providing alternate action and image-heavy learning (Alden & Pollock, 2011; Roxburgh & Caratti, 2018). Short and fast-paced technical training could break up the often-long hours of traditional and passive learning. For example, new media teachers could offer short and guided software tutorials every week to share frequently used tools, lists of helpful software shortcuts, and other resources students might access to learn more. Additionally, teachers could provide highly visual slides, viewing lists (Lockheart et al., 2004), and examples of past students' work (Haugnes & Russell, 2016). Further strategies to enhance student engagement with their creative practice, are included in [Section 7.3.3](#).

University staff in art departments need to critically examine how they operate from their own educational beliefs about art curricula (Hjelde, 2020). By having open conversations about how their value systems influence creative learning, staff could further reflect on and explore the impact of their values on students' university experiences and subsequently, their

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wellbeing. For example, some teachers might consider these research recommendations as relating to standardisation and technical competence, which aligns with neoliberal education ideals rather than ideals that heighten musing and creativity (Kalin & Barney, 2014). Despite these views, staff need to carefully consider the varied values and circumstances that motivate their students. This was highlighted in the research findings, given some participants ([Section 5.8](#)) were engaged in self-directed and authentic learning because they were aware that it would increase their employability (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009). Hence, the motivation for participants to become intentional producers of their learning aligned with both neoliberal ideals and transformative social justice frameworks (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019; Matthews et al., 2018).

The strategies recommended in this research encourage teachers to courageously explore new territory and take their own creative risks (Beghetto, 2018). Such risk-taking motivates

students' to further trust their teachers, have open discussions about failure, and apply creative risk-taking processes (Beghetto, 2018; Orr & Shreeve, 2017; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). The recommendations presented here and in the following subsections *do not* support the removal of challenging creative learning experiences. Instead, university staff need to contemplate how students can be better prepared and supported when they experience these challenges, to help them realise their strengths and weaknesses as artists (Daniel, 2016b). By acknowledging the existence of educational challenges and how they can help prepare students to achieve their goals for the future, university staff can further motivate students to manage challenges and adopt a sense of agency. This stance does not 'necessitate a blame-game' but embraces the need to act (Field & Duffy, 2012) to improve the wellbeing of both art students and staff in art departments.

To effectively and sustainably address students' wellbeing, the wellbeing of university staff also needs to be supported (Seton & Trouton,

2014). Many staff are navigating deteriorating work conditions (Cannizzo et al., 2019) and teachers are not always equipped to manage the emotional labour of assisting their students (Daddow & Schneider, 2017; Gulliver et al., 2019). Therefore, it is clear that transformation needs to be implemented at a structural level (de Bie, 2020; Orygen, 2020a) with a 'tone from the top' (Veness, 2016) to prioritise wellbeing and ensure that both students and staff are well equipped and supported to implement genuine change (Baik et al., 2017). The next section will address ways to further equip teachers, administrative staff, and support services to affect positive transformation.

### 7.3.2: INCREASE SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR UNIVERSITY STAFF

Australian university support services and teaching staff can be under-resourced and under-supported in their efforts to respond to student wellbeing needs (Brooker et al., 2019). Ways to assist university staff in responding to or preventing student mental health difficulties are often recommended in mental health frameworks and strategies (Orygen, 2020a; Productivity Commission, 2020). Similarly, this research positions teachers, administrative staff, and support services as valuable contributors to any wellbeing-framed transformation at university. To increase the effectiveness and sustainability of wellbeing intervention for students, and to improve their educational experiences, staff need access to additional assistance, resources, and training (Rashid & Loudon, 2019). Additionally, staff can benefit from partnerships with other members of the mental health and university community (Orygen, 2020a). The recommendations in this section are founded on participant comments

**Figure 7.2**

*Summary of Recommendations to Increase Support and Training for University Staff*



(e.g., [Section 5.3](#), [Section 6.4.1](#)) and focus first on support services, then teachers and administrative staff.

Many of the participant recommendations to improve support services at university align with other Australian research literature policy recommendations. Recently, the Productivity Commission (2020) recommended that the nature and extent of improvements are informed by the varied wellbeing needs of

**Improve support services, provide online and specialised support for art students.**

**Explore ways to improve communication between professional support staff and teachers.**

**Increase care and support for university staff.**

**Increase training for teachers.**

students. Given Australian support services have limited capacity to meet the demand and complexity of student mental health difficulties (Orygen, 2017; Veness, 2016), the increase of this capacity to address the full spectrum of student mental health should be viewed as a university and mental health sector initiative (Carlson et al., 2020; Orygen, 2020a). Reorganising, frequently promoting, and strengthening support services through a funded stepped care approach is necessary

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(Baik et al., 2019; Orygen, 2020a), so students are consistently made aware of the supports available from the day they start their degree, to the day they finish. To prioritise support service accessibility, current strategies including film and online platforms can be used to highlight typical help-seeking processes at university (Productivity Commission, 2020).

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“ ... unless someone is actively seeking it the helpful information can be easy to miss (SP 193, animation). ”

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This research proposes further consideration of how physical and online support services can be accessed. Embedding physical support services within isolated campuses, and providing less restrictive hours for student appointments, could accommodate the often time-consuming training commitments that visual art students experience ([Section 5.5](#); Lee, 2019). Evidence-based online strategies such as apps, support

packages, and anonymous counselling might also be a more familiar method for students seeking help, given many are digital natives ([Section 2.3](#); Carter & Goldie, 2017; Kampel et al., 2017). Since the onset of COVID-19, more support services are accessible online (Jurcik et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020) and online strategies to help art students manage their wellbeing in response to the pandemic have also been employed (LIP, 2020). This provision of online support and resources may be particularly helpful for overburdened services (Brooker et al., 2019), students who require timely assistance (Rashid & Loudon, 2019), students who are physically or geographically isolated from main support services (Orman et al., 2014), and students who otherwise choose not to seek help (Clark et al., 2019).

Teaching, administrative, and support staff might benefit from further transparency and communication regarding student mental health. Although requiring careful ethical consideration of student privacy, students experiencing mental

health challenges may benefit from healthcare professionals bringing their wellbeing needs to the attention of the teachers (LIP, 2020). Indeed, a “two-way transference of knowledge and understanding” between teachers and support services could ensure that students receive assistance that is tailored to their learning and wellbeing needs, while preventing teachers from adopting ‘quasi-counselling’ roles (Orygen, 2020a, p. 18). These collaborations could enhance student support by improving information exchanges (Moyle, 2019; Orygen, 2020a), enabling students’ experience of holistic ‘care-full’ practices (Motta & Bennett, 2018; Rose & Adams, 2014), supplying discipline-specific counselling for art students (Gonithellis, 2018; Greason et al., 2015), or potentially impacting how frequently students are reminded of the diverse help accessible to them during their degree.

University staff with mental health literacy skill are likely to be approached as gatekeepers to student support services and resources (Gulliver et al., 2019). Australian staff have been provided

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with evidence-based training, like the Mental Health First Aid (Kitchener et al., 2010),<sup>[27]</sup> to address limited awareness of support resources and services; clarify teacher duty of care; and learn how to identify, respond to, or prevent students' wellbeing challenges (Andrews, 2019). Despite placing additional financial demands on universities (Productivity Commission, 2020), this research advocates for free and mandatory mental health literacy training for staff (Orygen, 2017), with similar workshops available for students who want to take an active role in managing the safety of themselves and their peers (Thorn et al., 2020). Additionally, such training can cater to discipline-specific scenarios that students and staff experience. These scenarios could be anonymously provided by students and staff beforehand, to help facilitators prepare current and relevant content.

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27. The University of Melbourne have also provided mental health training for their staff through a 40-minute online course. For more information, visit <https://services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/staff/mental-health-training>.

The emotions imbued in creative teacher-student relationships are integral to student learning (Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Constructive teacher-student relationships necessitate that students and teachers feel supported and prepared to engage in effective and sustainable wellbeing intervention (Brooker et al., 2019; Hassed et al., 2009). Hence, a well-coordinated and integrated approach to building and maintaining a healthy university workforce can also benefit students (Orygen, 2020a). It is therefore important to cater to the teachers' needs by working around 'pressure' points in their teaching periods and encouraging the teachers' creation of realistic and effective self-care plans (Kuebel, 2019). Although some teachers might find the extra effort and time to train in the following areas challenging, doing so will align with their duty of care and may reduce their time and energy dedicated to supporting students who are distressed (Brooker et al., 2019; Orygen, 2020a).

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“ Both lecturer-practitioners and education researchers have an ethical

duty of care to both identify the quality of different potential risks present in the teaching or research activity and a subsequent assessment of the probability and severity of risks (Seton & Trouton, 2014, p. 103).

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Teachers are responsible for facilitating education that is not detrimental to student wellbeing (Baik et al., 2017). It is therefore necessary to consider how art teachers are trained to address the learning challenges that influence their students' wellbeing. The varied challenges discussed by the research participants in [Chapter 5](#) provide a structure for this training, which could be facilitated through practical academic workshops that provide relevant scenarios and opportunities for attendees to roleplay. In addition to being trained to teach wellbeing topics ([Table 7.2](#) in [Section 7.3.3](#)), teachers could benefit from further professional development opportunities to identify their

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teaching pedagogy and critically examine how their values and practices promote positive educational experiences (Conde et al., 2017).

A thorough examination of how art teachers' educational values impact student learning ([Section 7.3.1](#)), could require further discussion about the complexity of creative learning. For example, teachers could consider the complications of a crowded art curriculum and hidden arts curriculum (Gunn, 2020; Hjelde, 2020; Houghton, 2016). This might lead to a facilitated discussion about how teachers disparage certain topics or roles as unserious or unwelcome (Frenette & Dowd, 2018; Weida, 2016) as well as discussion about whose interests are best served in the curriculum according to those who are privileged, or biased views of the 'ideal' student (Gunn, 2020; Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Such open conversations may raise teachers' awareness and understanding of occasions when they are unknowingly discriminatory and disrespectful, when they:

- unknowingly discriminated or disrespected students,
- put unwarrantedly high expectations on students, and
- restricted students' exploration of their creative practice and professional identity.

Teachers have the power to influence their students' engagement in learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). For example, Biggs (2012) argues that student motivation is a product of good teaching, not a prerequisite. The research findings propose that student engagement could be increased if teachers were given further opportunity to develop their organisational and teaching skills ([Section 6.4.2](#)). Compulsory inductions and continued professional development opportunities for contract and tenured teachers can thus ensure that they are maintaining teaching university standards regarding classroom management, curriculum design, assessment criteria, and effective feedback. This training could also support teachers' focus on the current

circumstances of their novice learners, who are often psychologically challenged when learning (Clarke & Cripps, 2012) and are often juggling various commitments that impact their learning:

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“ We need to recognise that some valorised behaviours and approaches are materially out of reach for some of our students. The idea of the ever present student is a masculinised idea of the student unencumbered with children, financial constraints or responsibility (Orr & Shreeve, 2017, p. 51).

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In this research, participants welcomed authentic learning moments where their teachers took a less authoritative and casual approach ([Section 5.3](#)). Although a shift in authority can be uncomfortable, the findings do support the Students as Partners approach and align with recommendations for teachers to redefine traditional teacher-student relationships (Kiester

& Holowko, 2020). Cultivating these mutually respectful relationships could be achieved through practical workshops that enable art teachers' interrogation of complex relations specific to creative learning. For example, teachers could discuss scenarios in which students receive intimidating criticism and then decide if the benefits from the teachers' approach justify the risks to students' mental health (Seton & Trouton, 2014). Teachers' efforts to enhance student agency could be encouraged by the university through meaningful rewards and public acknowledgment (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019; Matthews et al., 2018). Additionally, teacher efforts to implement a pedagogy of care to improve and sustain student wellbeing could be celebrated (Motta & Bennett, 2018).

### 7.3.3: IMPLEMENT WELLBEING-ENABLING INTERVENTION INTO CURRICULA

The findings support ways to increase student wellbeing by weaving relevant topics into curricula and prioritising them as learning

**Figure 7.3**

*Summary of Recommendations to Implement Wellbeing Strategies into Curricula*



**Weave wellbeing-focused learning (Table 7.2) into curricula and co-curricular. Ensure that the topics are:**

- Meaningful, relevant, empowering and focused on increasing student agency;
- Aligned with learning objectives;
- Research-based and evaluated; and
- Encourage learning through art practice during class and assessment.

outcomes (Carlson et al., 2020). Such findings resonate with recent literature in the United Kingdom that recommended a redesign of creative curricula to build failure and resilience into projects (LIP, 2020). To motivate students' active involvement in wellbeing-promoted learning (Baik et al., 2019), the learning needs to be relevant to visual art students' strengths, goals, and university experiences ([Section 6.4](#)). This supports the stance that, for students to

value their learning, they need to view the content as personally meaningful to their lives during their degree and in the future (Martin, 2016). In this section, the delivery of wellbeing topics applicable to creative learning will be outlined.

To nurture students' understanding of how wellbeing-promoted learning is relevant to them, multi-level strategies can be considered. Although wellbeing-promoted learning could

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be delivered in one subject by one teacher, students are likely to benefit from a whole-of-curricula approach that considers all aspects of learning during the degree (Brooker et al., 2019; Orygen, 2020a) including strategic delivery at multiple stages of the degree, with varying levels of complexity (Beghetto, 2018; Blackler, 2014; Productivity Commission, 2020) and with support provided by artists, graduates, peer mentors, and support services. Students can learn this content through varied platforms including online or in-class guest lectures, panel presentations, and co-curricular development workshops—as well as references to resources such as podcasts, videos, websites, books, and psychological tools that focus on wellbeing management.<sup>[28]</sup>

Various creative methods could be applied to teach students about artists' wellbeing.

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28. For references to different psychological tools and recommendations for positive education, see Lambert et al. (2018), Marks and Wade (2015), Posner et al. (2017), Rashid and Loudon (2019), Schreiner et al. (2009), Seligman et al. (2009), and Wingert et al. (2020).

For example, design lectures could address processes to achieve a design solution by considering the psychology and motivation of the audience, which presents an opportunity for students to also explore their own motivations. Teachers could also provide research evidence and anecdotal examples of artists who managed challenges during their education or in their career. Such evidence can highlight artists' varied creative backgrounds, and access to different resources and coping strategies, to help students realise their own multifaceted wellbeing and resilience. For example, these discussions might remind students of their strengths like the wellbeing benefits of creative practice (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009; King et al., 2016b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), or their voice and power to transform themselves and their community through art (Roxburgh & Caratti, 2018).

Teachers, support services, or other qualified mental health professionals could implement relevant wellbeing topics into art curricula. [Table 7.2](#) below presents an evolving list of

wellbeing topics that apply to students' creative learning experience. These topics have emerged from the mixed findings and can be used to prepare visual art students for the various challenges they can experience during their learning, or once they graduate and seek entry to the creative workforce. Each topic in [Table 7.2](#) lists proposed interventions that need careful planning, research, and evaluation to sustain the benefits to students' wellbeing and prevent harm or discomfort. Hence, university staff should consider how this teaching can be designed within ethical frameworks to safeguard students and staff, by providing easily accessible support and ensuring that the content is delivered in safe and comfortable settings by appropriately trained professional staff. If effectively implemented, these wellbeing topics might address the participant needs reported in [Section 6.4.1](#) and respond to the exemplar quotes below:



If there were a unit that was designed to explain mental health issues within the context of visual art. Not the typical high school mental health class that listed out the symptoms in a clinical and detached manner. (SP 133, studio practice).

You go to animation in the morning, art or something in the afternoon and an hour or two that is just about your mental health, your ability to cope. And maybe they could take a break from focussing on the difficult aspects of the course [and] give you the skills that could help with the workload, help with the pressure. And then you run through some of those scenarios on a more regular basis (Dale, animation).

Universities could offer elective units that promote using art and creativity to de-stress, and focus on creating art for wellbeing rather than for academic purposes. (SP 208, printmaking).

I think having a way to force a conversation .... without sitting down with someone in that very sterile sort of environment saying those sorts of things (Brendan, interactive design).

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**Table 7.2**

*Wellbeing Topics Relevant to Creative Learning that could be Incorporated into Visual Art Curricula and Co-curricular Activities*

Wellbeing topic	Suggestions to guide topic delivery
Mental health and creativity	Explore the relationship between good mental health and creativity. Discuss the benefits of optimal wellbeing and resilience, including how it can help increase creativity (Rothenberg, 2001), and employability (Productivity Commission, 2019). Explore how students can use their strengths, like engagement and flow (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2014), to increase their wellbeing. Provide extracurricular opportunities for students to learn about mental health. For example, one Australian university, in partnership with Beyond Blue, is running an online course about understanding depression (Torrens University Australia, 2020). Improve students' mental health literacy and consider using strategies often used in positive education to do so (Seligman et al., 2009).
Time and motivation management	Teach intrapersonal skills like time management and organisation (Kuebel, 2019). Discuss how students can set short and long-term goals. Explore self-reflexivity and self-feedback as intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Gonithellis, 2018). Consider facilitating discussion about time management in peer or social group settings to combat any stereotypes and barriers (Lee, 2019).
Stress	Discuss how to identify differences between stress, distress, anxiety, and burnout. Explore ways to enhance resilience and mitigate these mental health difficulties. Explain that resilience and coping strategies can be changed and developed. Identify the effectiveness of different coping strategies and self-care, which can be guided by teachers incorporating caring practices into the classroom (Burke, 2017; Kuebel, 2019; Motta & Bennett, 2018). Consider self-care badges (Malczyk, 2019). Discuss the physical and mental limitations of the human body with the intent to normalise adaptive and restful behaviour in creative practice. Students' cognitive and behavioural capabilities can be explored by considering engagement and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Forgeard et al., 2014), self-regulated learning (Greene et al., 2019), and other creativity-led design and development strategies that are informed by neuroscience research (Gheerawo et al., 2020; Kaufman, 2014; Sawyer, 2011).

Wellbeing topic	Suggestions to guide topic delivery
Teamwork and conflict management	Focus on communication and teamwork skills. Discuss how to manage relationships with peers, colleagues, and figures of authority. Highlight what type of support is available to manage any relationship challenges, including challenges experienced during group assessment. Discuss working in teams when under pressure, with a focus on the variation of team member strengths and motivations (Rashid & Loudon, 2019). Provide basic training for mediation and conflict resolution and emotional intelligence (Baik et al., 2016). See <a href="#">Section 7.3.4</a> for more recommendations related to group work.
Creative thinking challenges	Provide an early discussion of creativity management including ways to navigate creative blocks. Examine design-thinking strategies and problem-solving processes. Introduce neuroscience and other research that explores creative thinking challenges. Give examples of other artists who have developed their creativity and have overcome creative thinking challenges. Explore ways that artists transition between mental states when they are or are not creating. This includes an exploration of how artists can transition from a sensitive state when creating, to a more resilient state when they are engaged in other daily functioning.
Social and educational preconceptions	Discuss how students and artists can experience a conflict of creative values and contradictory preferences in creative learning (Houghton, 2016). Consider the variation of creative styles and values with relation to bias both in university and broader society. Explore the varied perspectives on and differences between creative therapy and creative practice (Hjelde, 2020; Kalin & Barney, 2014). Address how artist stereotypes can impact how artists seek help and how people view creative learning (Daniel, 2016; DASSH, 2018; Weida, 2016). Explain how students may need to navigate power relations and institutional values to develop as artists, with reference to the support they can access to manage this at university and in the creative workforce.
Failure and uncertainty	Outline reasons why working in uncertainty and ambiguity is a typical creative process that can benefit artists (Sawyer, 2018, 2019). Discuss the importance of creative risk-taking and how perfectionism or fear of failure can debilitate creative learning (Shreeve, Sims, & Trowler, 2010; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). Examine ways for students to manage themselves and maintain momentum when they experience failure or success in their careers (Gonithellis, 2018).

Wellbeing topic	Suggestions to guide topic delivery
Managing feedback and expectations	Explore ways to received and manage constructive and unconstructive criticism within the context of professional, social, and personal expectations (Dobson, 2010; Tank, 2018). Highlight challenges regarding self-expectations (Mentally Healthy, 2020), self-comparison or self-doubt (Cloonan, 2008; Seton & Trouton, 2014), and how these challenges may need to be navigated in educational environments that inhibit creative risk-taking (Shreeve et al., 2010). Examine the varied ways that artists have managed these changes. Provide ways for students to safely practice giving and receiving feedback, potentially through anonymous online platforms (Rotsaert, Panadero, & Schellens, 2018).
Creative identity	Explain how artists' work is closely linked with their identity (Lindström, 2015; Logan, 2013) and can change during their career (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018). Explore ways for students to distinguish their self-worth and their work (Gonithellis, 2018). Discuss how teacher-student roles and identity construction is always in a state of flux (Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Highlight the lack of criteria to explicitly determine what it means to be a visual artist (Van Winkel, 2012) and how curricula can restrict support for those in minority and marginalised groups (Gunn, 2020). Provide examples of art students and graduates who have nurtured their creative identity and practice both during their degree and after graduation.
Industry preparation	Discuss various strategies that art graduates and seasoned artists have used to manage life after graduation. Help students identify the positive reasons why they have chosen to enter their prospective industry (Gonithellis, 2018). Highlight creative and, if relevant to students, psychological strategies to manage uncertainty in the future (Beghetto, in press; Gonithellis, 2018). Explore the common challenges that emerging artists experience, including money management, applying for jobs and grants, marketing and business topics, and networking. Explain how students can maintain their resilience despite financial hardships (Andrews & Chong, 2011). Discuss the breadth of different positions and practices inherent in the creative workforce, or embedded in other industries (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Bridgstock, 2013; Daniel, 2017) as well as alternate jobs students can acquire through their qualifications. Teach students how to network and provide better support for students who might feel uncomfortable about talking to art practitioners and peers.

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Given students often articulate their creative identity while they make art ([Section 2.4.1](#)), various practice-based activities could help students articulate their knowledge of wellbeing. Creative assessment tasks highlight to art students what aspects of their learning are important (Haugnes & Russell, 2016), which implies that students could prioritise their understanding of wellbeing topics through assessment. If carefully facilitated with attention to ethical guidelines, student learning objectives, and time restraints, these types of activities could motivate students' independent research on and interpretation of the topic while also allowing them to practice their creative skills.<sup>[29]</sup> This has been demonstrated by a collaboration between final year design students in Australia and staff from Orygen, who worked on the #chatsafe

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29. For more information—including different examples and researched outcomes of this process—please see Alden and Pollock (2011), Blackler (2014), Budge et al. (2013), Lockheart et al. (2004), Raein (2004), Roxburgh and Caratti (2018), and Weida, (2016).

project in 2020.<sup>[30]</sup> Art students could be asked to develop solutions for their creative peers to address mental health difficulties or help-seeking barriers (Bhuva, 2018). Additionally, students could interview one art practitioner and create a reflective artwork communicating how artists manage their careers—an approach that is similar to a reflective lawyering exercise designed by Field (2014).

Other precedents for developing creative and wellbeing-promoted assessment have been presented in scholarly literature. These precedents highlight the opportunity to facilitate learning about wellbeing or other complex and theory-heavy topics, by giving students the freedom to professionally practice their creative skills and styles in a more personal context (Budge et al., 2013). For example, Roxburgh

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30. This information was discussed during a webinar held on September 11, 2020 to mark World Suicide Prevention Day. However, this webinar was not recorded (Orygen, 2020b). For a written reference of the students' design work, see Portable (2020).

and Caratti (2018) describe a group assessment where students created visual campaigns to communicate cultural stereotype theory. Similarly, Reid and colleagues (2019) engaged students in making [mad art](#), and Blackler (2014) asked her design students to create timelines to construct their understanding of historic content. Although these tasks may take more time to complete (Blackler, 2014; Weida, 2016) they might be effective for students who find traditional and linear learning difficult, including those with visual or kinaesthetic learning styles, international students, mature-aged students who are readjusting to formal education, or students who are [neurodivergent](#) (Alden & Pollock, 2011; Lockheart et al., 2004; Raein, 2004).

Reflective learning processes such as journaling can increase students' motivation toward positive learning experiences (Fullana et al., 2016). When appropriately facilitated, reflective learning gives students the opportunity to be more creative and discover more about themselves, including new strategies to help

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them cope with challenges (Bhuva, 2018; Fullana et al., 2016; Murphy, 2017). Visual reflection tools like processfolios (Weida, 2016) or zines (Klein, 2010) give students the chance to create art in a low pressure and reflective manner. These tools may not align with problem-based learning and professional practice, but they could be used to help kinaesthetic and visual learners process creative theory or knowledge about wellbeing topics. For example, students could reflect on a moment in time when they or a peer bounced back from an educational or creative challenge. If positioned early and in multiple stages of their degree, students might grow accustomed to and sustain their practice of these reflective learning processes.

Higher education literature posits that art students cannot enhance their resilience in isolation (Latekefu et al., 2013). By fostering a supportive, inclusive and collaborative environment on campus, universities can positively impact students' identity building, self-development, and persistence to complete their

degree (Busher, 2012; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Alongside the implementation of wellbeing topics, this research proposes that scaffolding student career or learning goals with collaborative and networking activities can enhance students' commitment to student connectivity—and the subsequent development of social coping skills. To do so, the next section provides recommendations that focus on both connecting students and increasing industry experience. This is achieved by first focusing on peer community building that reflects industry practice (Zamberlan & Wilson, 2017) and increasing students' sense of belonging with their prospective industry.

### 7.3.4: FOSTER CREATIVE COMMUNITIES THROUGH PEER AND INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT

The development of student communities, and student activism, is restricted in Australian universities (de Bie, 2020). This restriction is due to higher education reforms that have led to the prioritisation of market-driven agendas and impersonal teaching environments (Daddow & Schneider, 2017; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Ryan, 2011). Consequently, the “reputational risk of ungovernable student associations” (Rochford, 2014, p. 490) and students’ limited time for extra commitments during their fast-tracked degrees (Naylor et al., 2020; Ryan, 2011) have limited student connectivity. This research thus acknowledges the importance for key stakeholders to shift their priorities to student support, engagement, and community building. Such prioritisation could facilitate a culture of respectful interaction between university staff, art practitioners, students, and their peers.

**Figure 7.4**

*Summary of Recommendations to Foster Creative Communities through Peer and Industry Engagement*



- Foster a space for visual art students to cultivate peer communities and practice their art.
- Increase peer mentoring, feedback, and panel discussions about the university experience.
- Improve management of group assessment.
- Increase industry guest visits, field trips, and networking events.
- Facilitate career check-ins, work experience, and career management training.

This research described participants’ creative community as supportive, inclusive, and open to exploring multiple perspectives or topics that are not commonly discussed ([Section 5.6](#)). These findings supported other research studies that have identified similarly supportive behaviour in the Australian creative workforce (Mentally Healthy, 2020; Never Not Creative et al., 2018) and artists’ openness to different

perspectives as a result of their resilience to marginalisation (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018).

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“ I guess in some ways it builds a really strong arts community because everyone bands together and has each other’s backs (Grace, painting). ”

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However, other participants felt lonely ([Section 5.4](#); Tank, 2019) or expressed a need for more positive interactions and development of communication skills during their education. Although this research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, research literature suggests that social distance restrictions might also have increased student loneliness, which necessitates an increase in digital interventions to improve connectivity and subsequently enhance wellbeing (Fisher et al., 2020; Parks & Boucher, 2020).

Some participants ([Section 5.8](#) and [Section 6.4.1](#)) were unmotivated or unable to invest time in extracurricular activities like networking events. Students can be unmotivated to engage in authentic creative collaboration if they are positioned in decontextualized learning environments (Mavri et al., 2020). It is thus important to consider student motivations before designing interventions that relate to peer support networks or communities that increase students' social coping. The following recommendations first address student

motivation and agency, by raising students' awareness of the holistic wellbeing and creative career benefits of building peer connections. The recommendations in this section then focus on strategies to forge supportive peer communities and communities of practice through university and industry engagement.

Peer communities can be positively shaped by teachers who create a culture of respect and acceptance within the classroom (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). This research recommends that teachers emphasise the benefits of peer relationships to students, including an increase in student belonging and engagement (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020; Zumbrunn, McKim, Buhs, & Hawley, 2014). Teachers could further explain how peer networking helps students develop communication skills, forge their own communities of practice, and potentially create new job opportunities (Frenette & Dowd, 2018; Logan, 2013; Wenger, 1998). Given peer connections can last long after art students

graduate from university (Mehta, 2017) and greatly impact students' ability to cope with education or industry challenges ([Section 6.2.3](#)), the following recommendations relate to increasing student community-building.

Virtual and physical learning spaces can enable creativity and student interaction. For example, open-plan studios can encourage peer learning and a sense of belonging with student communities of practice (Fleischmann, 2018; Zamberlan & Wilson, 2017) or online social spaces like Entourage can help students who experience social anxiety improve their social connections (Rice et al., 2020). Universities could capitalise on evidence and strengths-based strategies such as these to further cultivate conditions that enable wellbeing (Rashid & Loudon, 2019). One way to do this is through peer support programs.

Current research literature champions the effectiveness of peer support and peer-delivered interventions to benefit student

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mental health (Orygen, 2020a; Productivity Commission, 2020). For example, one Australian university pairs commencing students with a student mentor to guide their transition into higher education (Monash University, 2019). The United Kingdom's Student Minds charity also facilitates approachable, accessible, and safe peer support groups to help students learn to support themselves and others (LIP, 2020). While building upon examples such as these, this research proposes that universities entrust inclusive and student-managed social spaces to art students. These safe and positive spaces should be easily accessed by equity groups, and potentially a staff-free zone to help all students establish a sense of independence and belonging (de Bie, 2020; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020) and a chance to voice their needs after interacting with university staff (Seton & Trouton, 2014). These spaces could also be formally established and acknowledged as an achievement that is celebrated by the university (Veness, 2016).

Art practice can bring people together (Fielding & Trembath, 2020c). Therefore, peer-led spaces could be ideal spaces for connectivity if they are equipped with any appliances necessary for students to complete creative work, assessment, and portfolios together. This increases the potential for student social spaces to be intertwined with creative practice and creative curricula. For example, as a part of a final-year assessment, art students could be required to work in small groups to promote, monitor, and facilitate any multidisciplinary creative practice and workshops in this creative space, for the benefit of themselves and their peers. If appropriately trained in ethical leadership and mentorship, this assessment could help students collectively develop skills in engagement, facilitation, and supervision in different creative practices. Students could also use this space to support social clubs or plan events such as cohort camps and study tours.

Creative ideation may be easier in group settings when the stakes are low and students are not

'judged' through assessment (Choi et al., 2019). By encouraging student communities of practice, students' engagement in socially mediated learning will help them understand the creative standards of their community (Mavri et al., 2020). Teachers can include frequent in-class and informal peer feedback sessions early in the degree to stimulate student agency and positive social and creative habits (McDonald et al., 2019). For example, 'year-on-year-crits' can give students the opportunity to receive feedback on their progress from students in the year above them (Logan, 2013). Peer-led or teacher-monitored sessions like these have potential to help students bridge language gaps, model social behaviour, share ideas or creative techniques, and form a classroom culture that reflects industry practice (Budge et al., 2013; McDonald et al., 2019; Zamberlan & Wilson, 2017). Teachers could facilitate meaningful interactions without social pressures, by using online tools for students to provide monitored anonymous feedback (Rotsaert et al., 2018).

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Given students place value on their grades (Houghton, 2016), group assessment can motivate students to invest in peer connectivity. However, the research findings indicate that group assessment could be better facilitated to help students perceive group work as valuable and to help manage group challenges ([Section 6.4.2](#)). Before commencement of group assessment, teachers could adopt a strengths-based approach (Marks & Wade, 2015; Rashid & Loudon, 2019) and use ‘teacher-directed self-selection’ to encourage diverse and compatible group members (Bhuva, 2018; Tucker & Abbasi, 2016). Students could be trained with skills in effective communication, respectful conflict management, and creative collaboration (Chapman & Van Auken, 2001; Tucker & Abbasi, 2016) to help them feel safe enough to take creative risks during group assessment (Orr, 2010). Furthermore, fair assessment could be optimised by strategically placing one or multiple self-evaluation and peer-evaluation milestones in the assessment criteria and weighting grades as the year level increases—while and specifying

how students are graded on both the submitted product and teamwork process (Orr, 2010; Tucker & Abbasi, 2016).

Industry engagement within a student’s degree leads to positive wellbeing, education, and employment outcomes (Rashid & Loudon, 2019). Given most university students enrol in their degree for vocational outcomes (Norton et al., 2018) providing workforce-related education, industry interactions, and career advice can motivate students to ideate, gain feedback, make new contacts, forge communities of practice, and plan clearer goals for their future (Baik et al., 2019; Mavri et al., 2020). Despite the pressure of gaining social capital to acquire creative work (Ashton, 2015), any strong friendships that artists establish in the industry help them cope with challenges (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Mentally Healthy, 2020). This research proposes that art students’ connection with industry professionals during their degree will also increase their sense of belonging into the creative workforce:

“ ... feeling like you’re a part of the industry that you’re trying to get into (Leah, design).

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Varied educational strategies warrant consideration to increase students’ active engagement with their prospective industry (Daniel, Fleischmann, & Welters, 2017). In their first year, students should be informed of their university’s graduate attributes, introduced to career theory, asked to research their career interests, and taught how art practitioners perceive daily work tasks or other typical experiences in their industry (Bridgstock, 2011, 2013; Reid et al., 2019). Students could do so through lower pressured industry involvement such as emailing standard questions about the field to professionals (Daniel, 2010) or tours and field trips to local creative workplaces. Students also benefit from free access to current creative news, work, or events that keep students apprised of their local and international industry. In these cases, teachers could facilitate

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such relevant information with their students during class or through weekly notices.

Regular conversations with recent graduates and art practitioners are likely to provide students with invaluable insights into how to manage their creative wellbeing. These discussions could be delivered bi-monthly by diverse speakers, including those who identify with equity groups, to provide students with authentic insights about how the speakers managed creative learning and workforce challenges. Recent examples of universities facilitating informal and authentic conversations can be found online.<sup>[31]</sup> Similarly, art students could benefit from asking anonymous questions through initiatives such as the Asking For A Friend event (Never Not Creative, 2020) or other online platforms that

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31. For example, see the Future Forward symposium ([www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiEMYGcRMHqyxiLH0kCwQYiZJ7CK6Ilen](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiEMYGcRMHqyxiLH0kCwQYiZJ7CK6Ilen)), or the University of Melbourne Ask Alumni program (<https://mentoring.unimelb.edu.au/p/p10/about>).

help students connect (Clay & Tabak, 2020) and comfortably discuss wellbeing-related challenges (Clark et al., 2019; Productivity Commission, 2020). Students could receive high quality and meaningful career advice in the later stages of their degree, through informal career check-ins with teachers and peers, or formal final-year meetings that involve the teacher and one industry member.

Work integrated learning (WIL) experiences give students further opportunity to be part of an industry community and learn workplace culture (Briant & Crowther, 2020). To carefully manage and mitigate negative aspects of participation, methods to teach students career management could be paired with strategies like the WIL wellbeing model (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). This model ensures that institutional oversight, and focussed academic and community support, helps students manage social, economic, personal, or physical impacts during their placement (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). Art departments could facilitate

students' specialised or embedded creative industry placement (Daniel & Daniel, 2013; Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014) through online WIL programs (Briant & Crowther, 2020), community and civic projects (Bhuva, 2018; Shreeve, Smith, & Triantafyllaki, 2010), or in-house projects with 'real world' clients (Latekefu et al., 2013). In such placement, students' ePortfolios (Roberts, Maor, & Herrington, 2016; Rowley, Dunbar-Hall, Blom, Bennett, & Hitchcock, 2016) or reflective writing (Zelenko & Bridgstock, 2014) could articulate how their experience informs their career aspirations.

Additional resources or group work could facilitate and sustain students' active engagement with their industry and peers. Building upon the feedback sessions recommended earlier in this section, active and meaningful student networking could be encouraged. This could be achieved by assessing final-year students on their ability to work in groups to raise funds, plan, and manage an industry networking event for a diversity of students and local art community members. Teachers aiming for

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optimal outcomes will need to consider how students are sufficiently equipped with industry experience and networking skills ([Table 7.2](#)). Furthermore, teachers will need to negotiate how much free rein students receive to ensure the event they create meets their needs and provides them with a sense of ownership and pride in attending. Similar to graduate exhibitions or conferences, such industry events might provide students with opportunities to showcase their artwork, invite stakeholders to hold keynote presentations, and celebrate student achievements by presenting awards.

The research findings indicate that students experience varying levels of self-esteem, uncertainty, doubt, and stress when considering their future in the creative workforce ([Section 5.8](#)). Although further exposure to and interaction with creative industries can buffer students against these work-related challenges, students could also benefit from psychological training and intentional development of personal and mental strategies (Gonithellis, 2018; Moyle,

2019). Teaching students mental exercises such as visualising their ideal future, exploring their future selves in multiple workforce contexts, and expressing gratitude could develop students' resilience in the face of adversity (Rashid & Loudon, 2019; Reid et al., 2019; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Creative students could learn how to manage low levels of motivation, self-limiting thoughts, and anxiety through co-curricular training based on frameworks like Acceptance Commitment Therapy (Gonithellis, 2018). The final recommendation category below will refocus on students' academic experiences by addressing how universities inform art students about their learning.

### 7.3.5: CLARIFY STUDENT EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR DEGREE

This research indicates that the participants' wellbeing needs could be met by further supporting and preparing art students for their creative learning experiences. These findings suggest that students can be made more aware of the support available to them through university services ([Section 7.3.2](#)) and through external platforms also available to art practitioners and graduates. Additionally, the findings ([Section 6.4.1](#)) indicate that university staff can improve art students' wellbeing by building student awareness of administrative processes and educational culture—topics that are usually familiar to staff but unfamiliar to students. This section discusses ways that students can benefit from open channels of communication to help them acquire further understanding of their degree objectives, their creative learning, and their teacher's duty of care.

“ A simple awareness of the potential mental health implications of various

Figure 7.5

Summary of Recommendations to Clarify Student Expectations of their Degree



Provide clear and open communication about the key lessons and culture that commencing students will experience.

Discuss the teacher's duty of care, student conduct, and learning responsibilities.

Highlight the values and aspects of creative learning that are prioritised within the degree.

Explain student learning objectives by using language that novice learners will identify with.

administrative processes could avoid adding additional stressors to student mental health (Productivity Commission, 2020, p. 266).

Art degrees may not always support students' interests that first attracted them to the degree ([Section 2.4.1](#)). The participants in this

research revealed such unmet expectations (e.g., [Section 5.2.2](#)) when expressing multiple challenges about their creative learning—challenges that often highlighted types of conflict within already crowded art curricula (Hjelde, 2020; Houghton, 2016; Weida, 2016). This was apparent when participants felt pressured to produce personal, novel, and original work (Grant, 2010; Lipson et al., 2016;

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McDonald, 2008) or viewed creative therapy as either neoliberal (Kalin & Barney, 2014) or an important aspect of their wellbeing and creative practice (Davies et al., 2016). Some participants expressed uncertainty about their identity as artists because their curriculum lacked specific and specialised training (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Houghton, 2016), as the comments below indicate:

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“ ... it’s a struggle trying to explain it to people ... Because I literally do a completely different subject every single semester. There is no one subject that is continuous with another (Mia, interactive design).

... if you just want to be a curator or you want to be a critic or you just want to be an arts researcher, then why should they be forced to do the practical stuff? (Andrew, painting).

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These findings highlight a need for universities to provide commencing students with more detailed and authentic promotion of their current degrees. As Ashwin (2019, p. 184) states, art departments cannot “let art and design education off the hook in its lack of clarity about what it offers students.” Art departments could thus include promotional material—by using language that novice learners can understand—to clarify how prospective students are expected to engage with their creative learning, to achieve the subject and course learning objectives and acquire necessary graduate attributes. This promotional material could help students actively explore how the degree fits with their learning styles and objectives. Additionally, promotional or orientation material can explain how the curriculum navigates tensions or contradictions (Houghton, 2016; Weida, 2016) by training students to be specialists or ‘jacks of all trades,’ or prioritising specific teaching models such as transgressional and therapeutic teaching (Hjelde, 2020).

“ You know, there wasn’t any specific course that said, “Hey, you must have skills—” that you don’t have (Leah, design).

I feel a bit ripped off that I’ve put in the money and effort to go to university, to get little applicable skills and knowledge about the industry (SP 47, interior environments).

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As indicated in the quotes above, some participants were not told that their degree excluded the development of certain knowledge and skills ([Section 5.8](#)). If universities inform students of what they will not be taught, students may feel more empowered to independently train as artists. University staff could encourage this training by providing access to co-curricular tasks, workshops, or resources that can genuinely help students acquire the skills they are not directly taught. While doing so, students can be reassured that independent learning

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is an ideal transferrable skill to acquire, given most artists continue to learn after their formal training (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017). Teachers could establish students' understanding of the relationship between their formal training and the creative workforce by explaining why teachers cannot precisely imitate the reality of industry practice while simultaneously protecting students from the commercial restrictions of the workplace (Orr & Shreeve, 2017).

To meet the needs of diverse student groups when they are seeking enrolment or other administrative advice, universities should provide clear processes and information. Art departments can celebrate the student perspective on this university experience by asking enrolled students to share their own creative interpretation, and identify the key lessons that commencing students will learn—as previously demonstrated by final-year engineering students (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019; Loch & Lamborn, 2016). During orientation, diverse panels of students, alumni, or professional artists could inform

commencing students on how to navigate their degrees. Teachers subsequently build upon this information by clarifying their teaching pedagogy, philosophy, responsibilities, and duty of care to students. This potentially increases students' agency by giving them an opportunity to identify their own learning philosophy, understand their educational responsibilities, and realise effective ways to seek help. Such conversations must be carefully facilitated to ensure students feel comfortable with using help-seeking processes at university.

Open conversations between teachers and their class can assist students in adjusting to creative learning and work in the creative industries. As suggested by one participant (Piper, interactive design), teachers can provide information about their career. When possible, teachers could also share the 'secrets' of academia, including institutional norms that help students more confidently navigate their university (de Bie, 2020). Potentially, teachers could share how they have managed challenges

such as time pressures in academia. Raising awareness of these institutional norms could lead to students' metacognitive awareness of how they are learning (Bovill et al., 2011) and further understanding of how the teachers' values can influence students' learning (Hjelde, 2020). Furthermore, these discussions could highlight to students how teachers manage multiple roles and power relations when teaching (Orr & Shreeve, 2017).

Ambiguity and resilience are intertwined with creative curricula to increase students' creativity, determination, and tolerance to uncertainty (Orr & Shreeve, 2017; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). However, as mentioned in [Section 7.3.1](#), students require further support to learn how to tolerate and function in ambiguity. Providing clear and consistent explanations from the first year (Sawyer, 2019) supports students' understanding of why incoherent or ambiguous criteria and experiencing failure can benefit their creative practice (Greene et al., 2019; Shreeve et al., 2010) and wellbeing in the future. These

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explanations could outline the skills other artists have developed by embracing uncertainty, and how other artists have navigated a culture where failure is undesirable and output is generally valued over process (Clarke & Cripps, 2012; White, 2007). If students are given multiple chances to realise that they are not alone in experiencing creative learning challenges, they may be willing to more openly discuss their challenges and seek help through various coping strategies and resources.<sup>[32]</sup>

#### 7.4: CONCLUDING THE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The research recommendations in this chapter present diverse and multi-levelled ways to improve and sustain visual art students' wellbeing during their complex university experiences. While considering the overarching

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32. These resources might simply include TED talks like Markus Zuak's The failurist (visit <https://youtu.be/A-8QIdm4hA>) or self-help resources websites like The Happiness Trap (visit <https://thehappinesstrap.com/free-resources/>) and the Positive Psychology Center (visit <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu>).

research question ([Section 1.2](#)), many participant responses focussed on ways to sustain their wellbeing both during their degree and after they graduate ([Section 6.4](#)). However, students did not discuss how their proposed interventions could be *sustainably* applied and managed in higher education. Although this was not a specific topic that participants were asked about during data collection, ensuring the sustainability of wellbeing intervention is highly significant for effective transformation. Various sociocultural and socio-ecological factors, systems, and processes merit consideration to realise intervention sustainability—which is currently being addressed in more depth, nuance, and subtlety through the third wave of positive psychology research (Lomas et al., 2020).

To be sustainable, the research recommendations must accommodate complexity, dynamism, diverse perspectives and paradigms, and multiple individual and community languages. Recent positive education research takes this into account by considering

the students' learning environment, culture, and other systems surrounding each student including their, family, workplace, and local community (Kern et al., 2019; Lomas et al., 2020). This research thus necessitates that wellbeing interventions enable the meaningful transformation of system conditions, address power imbalances and inequities, are attentive to the language used in each intervention, and provide each student with access to strategies and motivations to change (Kern et al., 2019; Lomas et al., 2020; Oades et al., 2020). In light of social distancing restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19, is it also important that students have access to digital wellbeing interventions (Parks & Boucher, 2020).

Teachers play a critical role in nurturing the creativity and resilience of their students (Clarke & Budge, 2010; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). However, any change enacted by the teachers and students can be enabled or restricted by infrastructure development, research processes, and access to other resources. These resources

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are often determined by the decisions of key stakeholders including senior university staff and the Australian government. Strong leadership and long-term commitments are thus required to steer the collaborative efforts of all community members towards improved and sustainable higher education conditions that benefit student wellbeing. At the very least, this necessitates a change in higher education policy to better prepare students and staff for the financial and academic challenges they are likely to experience, given the ongoing effect of COVID-19 on the Australian economy.

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“ ... placing mental health and wellbeing high on the agenda of decision makers, in every facet of operations, sends a strong message to all in the university community about the value and importance of mental health and wellbeing for all (Orygen, 2020a, p. 16). ”

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The federal government’s funding freeze since 2017, and the 2020 funding reform legislated in the wake of COVID-19, negatively impacts art students’ university experience. Research conducted before the pandemic indicates how university students were financially burdened, with evidence of how this impacted their wellbeing (Universities Australia, 2018, 2019). However, students enrolling in certain courses, such as those teaching the visual arts, will soon be expected to pay even higher fees (Daly & Lewis, 2020; Doidge & Doyle, 2020; Grant-Smith et al., 2020). Additionally, the quality of visual art education will be affected, given Australian universities typically respond to low government funding by discontinuing smaller courses, reducing staff numbers, and reducing the engagement of community and industry experts with students ([Section 2.2](#)).

COVID-19 has severely affected the creative arts workforce, which has adversely affected the mental health of artists (ArtsHub, 2020; Brunt & Nelligan, 2020). Many in the creative industries

have not been operating since the pandemic shutdowns and social distancing restrictions, and the arts workforce has experienced a significant loss of employment (Coates et al., 2020; Fielding & Trembath, 2020b). In response to the impacts of the pandemic on the Australian economy, the government has provided an appreciated, yet inadequate funding package to support all Australian artists’ financial difficulties (Flew & Kirkwood, 2020). Job hunting in the Australian arts sector is likely to remain competitive, given trends with low expenditure from the federal government ([Section 2.4.2](#)) and the tendency for Australian philanthropic giving and grants to be affected by financial crises (van Barneveld & Chiu, 2018). These changes will fundamentally burden artists and art students alike; impacting their ability to sustain creative careers and subsequently their financial freedom, mental health, and wellbeing—during their education and well after graduation.

It is imperative that visual art students are taught how to protect their wellbeing and prepare

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for future challenges. Now, more than ever, universities need to heed the call for wellbeing intervention in Australian art education. The recommendations in this chapter, that are summarised in the list below, require changes to policy. Such changes in policy can provide a step towards effective and sustainable transformation to benefit student wellbeing:

- reassess how current curricula support student wellbeing by including content that is coherently organised, distributes power, and prevents uncomfortably evocative, discriminatory, or disengaging content;
- improve the quality and accessibility of online or on-campus support services for art students;
- improve training and support for university staff to respond to mental health difficulties, practice respect of students' wellbeing, and empower student agency;

- implement wellbeing-enabling interventions into curricula by ensuring that these interventions are relevant to the student's creative learning goals;
- cultivate supportive creative communities on campus, including student support groups; and
- increase industry engagement to prepare students for challenges they will experience in the creative workforce.

University staff, like art students, fundamentally risk failure in the interest of achieving a better outcome (Anderson, 2002; Smith & Henriksen, 2016). Transforming higher art education to benefit student wellbeing can be considered a risk, but a risk worth taking if it protects and enhances the lives of visual art students. The following chapter will further summarise the importance of the research and recommendations to achieve such transformation.



# CONCLUSION

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## 8.1: SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This research provides a wellbeing needs assessment of visual art students in Australian higher education. By describing visual art students' perspectives on their current mental health, resilience, and wellbeing, this research contributes original knowledge by presenting an evidence base to drive future visual art higher education reform. This evidence base bridges a gap in the Australian research literature ([Section 2.4.4](#)) by representing visual art students' perspectives on ways to improve and sustain student wellbeing in Australian higher education. Consequently, the wellbeing needs assessment provided through this research has met the overarching research purpose, question, and objectives outlined in [Section 1.2](#).

The following sections in this chapter explain the potential impact of this wellbeing needs assessment. [Section 8.2](#) will first provide a synthesis of the research to explain why this research was conducted using the chosen

methodological and interpretative approaches. Following this synthesis, [Section 8.3](#) will outline the significance of the research within current educational contexts, and [Section 8.4](#) will examine the research limitations. The remaining sections will detail how this research has raised further questions and opportunities for new research to guide the implementation of wellbeing intervention in higher education.

## 8.2: SYNTHESIS OF THE RESEARCH

To rigorously explore the wellbeing needs of visual art students in Australian universities, their educational experiences needed to be understood. A review of extant literature ([Chapter 2](#)) established current understandings of the research area by examining the issue of mental health difficulties in Australian universities, and creative learning or workforce challenges that directly effect visual art students' wellbeing. Consequently, this review identified the potential for visual art students to be marginalised and negatively impacted during their educational experience.

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To empower and respect the moral agency of participants who could be potentially marginalised, a transformative parallel mixed methods approach was applied ([Chapter 3](#)). This approach ensured that the researcher established respectful and trusting relationships with participants while reflexively recognising power differences between the researcher and the researched (Biddle & Schafft, 2015; Hugman et al., 2011). The data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting processes were thus designed to empower participants and prevent harm or discomfort ([Section 3.5.2](#)). Rather than displaying the mixed findings as parallel quantitative and qualitative parts (Bryman, 2007), this research applied various stages of analysis to ensure that the mixed findings were genuinely integrated to present a more complete picture of participants' wellbeing ([Section 4.4](#)). Scaffolds for this integration were achieved through the development of narrative themes ([Section 4.4.1](#)) and wellbeing domains ([Section 4.4.2](#)) that were used to compare the mixed findings in tabular displays ([Section 5.10](#) and [Section 6.3](#)).

A key strength of this mixed methods design was how the qualitative findings extended understanding of participants' learning experiences and wellbeing. These findings provided a foundational narrative that incorporated participants' diverse perspectives on their learning experiences, challenges, resilience, and recommendations—all to demonstrate the complex and multifaceted nature of visual art student wellbeing. Although prioritising the representation of students' voices through qualitative data, this narrative was also enhanced by the quantitative survey scores and relative frequency counts ([Section 6.3](#)). Consequently, the research recommendations that were extrapolated from the mixed findings addressed various multi-levelled systems and processes relevant to students' wellbeing needs, within the context of their creative learning objectives, values, and motivations.

### **8.3: SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

This research offers an evidence-based step towards meeting the wellbeing needs of

Australian visual art students in higher education. Although the research data were collected and analysed before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the research recommendations are considered more relevant than ever. These recommendations present significant insights for supporting visual art students who will continue to experience significant changes to their Australian higher education, the creative arts workforce, and the wider economy. These students will arguably need to navigate challenges including increased fees for their education, decreased job opportunities and funding, and increased levels of isolation and mental health difficulty ([Section 7.4](#)). It is thus the responsibility, and challenge, of Australian universities to promote students' resilience and wellbeing—by cultivating safe, positive, and discipline-specific learning experiences that prepare students for the challenges they experience now, and in the future.

To date, there is limited national research that intentionally provides a descriptive wellbeing

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profile of Australian visual art students. This transformative and mixed research has thus established an original evidence base. By prioritising the student's voice to explore their views on supporting student wellbeing in higher education ([Section 1.1](#)), this research abandons the 'blame the student' mentality and empowers students as agents who are vital to ensuring successful and sustainable change. Hence, the research has argued that the opinions of all university students matter, including marginalised students pursuing a career in the arts ([Section 2.4.1](#)). This stance thus enables the potential development of effective and discipline-specific solutions that empower students and other art and university community members to support the wellbeing of visual art students.

This research used alternative strategies to gather, analyse and interpret the data. For example, the mixed data in this research were genuinely integrated during analysis, whereas mixed methods research typically mixes data

at the design and discussion level (Bryman, 2007; Sweetman et al., 2010). Furthermore, the unique visual identity and the Visual Art Wellbeing (VAW) logo used to recruit participants ([Section 3.6](#)) were intentionally created as an alternative strategy to engage the Australian visual art community in the research. Following the publication of this thesis, the research findings will also be disseminated through highly visualised open-access reports ([Section 4.2](#)). These visual and digital resources will better accommodate the social and physical positioning of art students and can be used to dismantle knowledge transfer hierarchies to achieve art community solidarity (Mertens, 2009b).

The researcher's position as a past and present student, art educator, and artist ([Preface](#)) has contributed to their reflexive and critical thinking throughout this research. These roles have increased the researcher's engagement with other art undergraduate and postgraduate students, graduates, and practitioners in Australia. Such engagement has

enriched the research by helping the researcher meaningfully design and test the effectiveness of methodological strategies, contemplate varied interpretations of data, and build upon personal knowledge to generate deeper and more rigorous research that seeks transformation ([Section 3.2](#)). Although this research highlights the experience and voice of undergraduate students, it also reflects the varied roles and complexities involved in the university experience, given the researcher intentionally considered the experience of visual art students, art teachers, and artists when practising reflexivity ([Section 5.1](#)).

#### **8.4: LIMITATIONS**

Despite the researcher's transformative position and efforts to conduct rigorous research, there are limitations that impact the transferability of the research findings. First, the researcher is not qualified as a healthcare professional and therefore did not identify participants' compromised mental health nor reflect the expertise of a healthcare worker in the research.

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Transformative researchers acknowledge and build upon their own value biases to achieve empowering change for their participants ([Section 3.2](#)) and numerous checks were put in place to explain how these findings were framed by the researcher, who maintained the perspectives of an artist, art student, and art teacher. Although research interpretations can be threatened by a dependence on the subjective perspectives of the researcher (Kern et al., 2019), the use of mixed methods and various reflexive processes were applied to counteract these threats (Birt et al., 2016; Jehn & Jonsen, 2010).

Given the collection methods between the data strands varied, the extent that the data for each strand meets the research objectives also varies. This benefits the breadth of perspectives represented in this research, but as Farmer et al. explain, such a variance provides a challenge when seeking to confirm the rigour and validity of findings, because the presence or absence of themes “might be due to these inherently different qualities of the data sets or methods

themselves” (2006, p. 390). Consequently, the analysis and interpretation of the findings, including the development of narrative themes and wellbeing domains, cannot be extrapolated or generalised ([Section 4.4.3.1](#)). Instead, the prioritisation of qualitative research has achieved rich description of Australian visual art students’ wellbeing that can be deeply explored to foster transformation.

The participants represent a small percentage of the visual art student population, which suggests that the findings could be biased in unknown ways. Although gender is not viewed as a significant variable in student opinion (White, 2007), there was an overrepresentation of female participants and thus some potential for gender bias. Participation in the research was voluntary and consisted of self-reports. Hence, the findings can be influenced by recall and social desirability bias. There was potential for participants to misunderstand the questions they were asked, or they may have been more strategic in their responses to accommodate what they believed

that authoritative figures—such as teachers or the researcher—expected of them. Nevertheless, research on student wellbeing is often founded on student self-reports,<sup>[33]</sup> and this research reveals empirical insights regarding the challenges and strengths that are unique to visual art students.

Transformative research allows the voices of the researched to be heard, often through participatory action research ([Section 3.2](#)). This research included participatory action methods like member checking, yet the scope of this member checking was limited to respect the participants’ time and prevent disengagement ([Section 4.2.1](#)). Consequently, participants were not given the opportunity to offer their feedback on the effectiveness or sustainability of the final research recommendations presented in [Chapter 7](#). This merits further research attention to assess the applicability of the recommendations, which are discussed in the next section.

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33. For examples of wellbeing-focussed research that is founded on student self-reports, see Chapter 2.

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## 8.5: FURTHER RESEARCH

This research is not exhaustive but provides a step towards championing wellbeing for visual art students in Australian higher education. The limitations discussed in the previous section serve as a reminder that wellbeing intervention requires a rigorous understanding of multiple contexts and conditions that influence how the interventions can be beneficially implemented. When viewed within the theoretical framework of this research, the complexity of factors that these participants experienced reinforces the need for transformation that addresses the multifaceted nature of wellbeing and resilience ([Section 4.2](#)). Without further research-led evaluation, it is difficult to draw nuanced conclusions about the recommendations presented in [Chapter 7](#). Subsequently, there is a need for universities to build on these findings by also researching the unique wellbeing needs of their visual art undergraduate cohorts—to evaluate, refine, and implement change that benefits student wellbeing. This could yield nuanced insights regarding the wellbeing of art students from

different tertiary institutions and demographic groups, including international students, students studying in regional and remote locations, and students with disabilities.

Higher education will continue to fluctuate and change in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is thus critical for continued research to determine visual art student perspectives on their education and promising strategies for wellbeing-framed change to address these current contexts. Although visual art students will experience challenges that students in other study areas experience ([Section 7.2](#)), interventions that articulate ways to cope with these challenges can be effective if the language of the visual art students' discipline is used. As these research findings have highlighted, reinforcing students' engagement with their creative practice is a primary focus for reform. Researching the student's creative identity, their creative practice, and the culture of their community or prospective workplace—within the context of COVID-19 and their

current learning environments—also has potential to increase the practicability of the intervention.

This research has been positioned within a transformative framework yet acknowledges the current, continued role that neoliberalism plays in higher education. Although some of the recommendations propose that students can be empowered within the current education systems, there is a need for emancipation from discriminatory power structures that prioritise dominant paradigms and backgrounds (de Bie, 2020; Gunn, 2020). Some participants touched on topics of diversity and agency when they expressed a desire to have mutually respectful teacher-student relationships, and to be recognised as more than passive recipients of knowledge. This, and the series of creative and insightful recommendations provided by participants, could perhaps indicate that these students were willing to move beyond traditional teaching models and actively contribute to

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improving their education. Further systematic enquiry is needed to thoroughly explore how to foster empowering student partnerships that effectively influence wellbeing-framed transformation in visual art university degrees.

The voice of many participants in this research called for action from their university. However, university staff are restricted by limited resources and policy that structure their working conditions ([Section 2.2](#)). More research is necessary to help staff manage systematic challenges that restrict the changes recommended in [Section 7.3](#). The onset of COVID-19 accelerated the need for this research to provide a full picture of current art education in Australian universities, by considering the involvement of university staff, support services, employers, art practitioners, and art graduates—or other systems that affect and are affected by change. Furthermore, systematic enquiry can focus on how current demand-driven funding has impacted art departments across Australia. Such research

has potential to build pathways to future policy decisions and improved teaching practice.

Other visual art student wellbeing and help-seeking topics emerged from the findings as potential areas for research. Such research areas could explore how further channels of communication between the arts sector and universities can influence student belongingness, or mitigate barriers to art students' help-seeking. The research findings revealed times when participants' experienced low mood, self-esteem, and emotional 'rollercoaster rides' as they practiced their art ([Section 5.9](#)). New research could also build upon these findings by specifically measuring visual art students' emotional regulation and self-esteem, and exploring ways to help visual art students manage any challenges pertaining to these factors, through sustainable and meaningful wellbeing intervention.

Although the scope of this research was restricted to visual art students, other students

from different study areas can experience similar challenges during university education. Some creative art disciplines were not included in this research ([Section 3.5.1](#)) and, given limitations of the sample scope, this research did not report comparisons according to participant disciplines ([Section 5.2](#)). The voices of students—including those studying disciplines such as photography, history, engineering, or information technology—are valuable and need to be represented through research. Subsequently, there is an opportunity for further systematic enquiry to compare the experiences of tertiary art students according to their discipline. This could be achieved by building upon the strengths and limitations of this research. Using similar techniques to gather data from a larger scope of students with different art disciplines could provide a more refined needs assessment and recommendation that cater to their unique disciplinary needs. Such research could also be extended to postgraduate students, or students seeking qualifications through vocational education and training institutions such as TAFE.

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## 8.6: CLOSING REMARKS

From the moment they decide to become artists, art students contend with elements of society that question their worth. Australia's current economic austerity particularly influences a misunderstanding that art students' efforts are less valuable, given their degrees are considered less likely to lead to job growth and are often neglected by their country's leadership. It is not surprising that art students question their own value. Yet, the determination and grit that students show by battling doubt and marginalisation tells a different story about their worth. It takes particular courage and strength to pursue a career that is different and often underrecognised by society. Indeed, there is room to celebrate the efforts of art students who are willing to continuously persevere—and potentially thrive—through challenging conditions in higher education and the workforce.

Despite these challenging conditions, there is research that clearly identifies the value that

artists contribute to the Australian economy and society ([Section 2.5](#)). This research shows that visual art graduates who are well-equipped to flourish in their prospective industry can further benefit the Australian public by positively influencing media and culture, to foster solidarity and shift views on mental health and resilience. Investment in resilience training, and wellbeing-framed creative learning to enhance art student wellbeing, will benefit the broader Australian community. After all, future artists will contribute to cultural, innovative, and economic agendas—as well as the global positioning of Australia. Enhancing the art student's university experience can therefore benefit artists' wellbeing, and the wellbeing of the nation.

Rather than lamenting how universities can negatively impact student wellbeing, this research concludes with a celebration of art students' agency and a vision for transformation. Visual art students can be

empowered to use their creative strengths to cultivate resilient practice. This wellbeing needs assessment provides a foundation for further research to build upon the overarching research question: **How can visual art students' current wellbeing be improved and sustained during their higher education?** A new and more specific question emerges: How can visual art students realise and adapt their strengths to thrive while they are at university? This research begins to answer the question with a simple response: it's complicated. There is no 'one size fits all' solution. However, students should be given every opportunity to be aware and well-equipped for their experience as art students, and artists in the future.

Transformation can be messy, difficult, and partial. Nevertheless, it is crucial if universities want to empower their students and achieve greater social justice. Prioritising student voices in the research recommendations provides a basis for transformation, and this research

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presents an opportunity for university staff to take their own creative risks and optimise their innovation processes—to benefit the lives of emerging visual artists. This requires courageous and strong leadership at all levels of university, a commitment to the ethical duty of care, and acceptance that sustainable change requires persistent planning and action. The stakes may be high, but whatever the risks and efforts of universities are to forge effective transformation, they are far exceeded by the consequential benefits to artists and the broader Australian community.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: SURVEY DESIGN

11/26/2018

Qualtrics Survey Software



### Information Sheet and Consent



This is a cartoon version of Eileen, the Principal Investigator. She is going to drop in every now and then to help explain things during the survey.

You are invited to participate in a research project called "Championing wellbeing in higher education: A needs assessment of mental health in Australian visual art students" (or the shorter version: Visuals Arts Wellbeing). This research is being conducted by Principal Investigator Eileen Siddins and will contribute to the investigator's doctorate degree.

[Click to view more information about the survey >](#)

#### Information about the survey

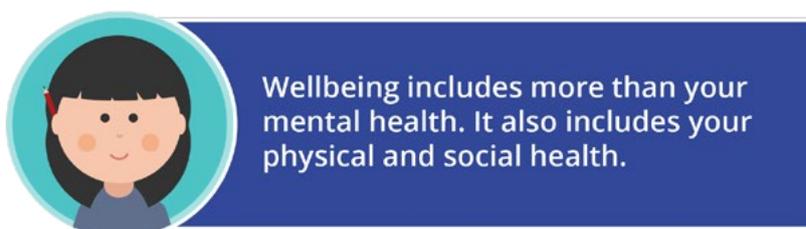
This **15-20-minute online survey** asks questions about your wellbeing, resilience, and mental health. The data collected from this survey could improve the way Australian tertiary visual art students are taught during their art degree, which may benefit their wellbeing and academic achievement.

The online survey is **anonymous**—your individual responses cannot be identified. The data collected from this survey will be used in research publications and conference presentations. Data may also be used in less-formal blog entries or unpublished online reports.

<https://jcuchs.au1.qualtrics.com/ControlPanel/Ajax.php?action=GetSurveyPrintPreview>

1/17

You may find that some of the questions in this survey are upsetting. It's okay to skip questions or stop if you want. You can access counselling, support or formal health care from qualified professionals in your university. Help is also available through services like [Lifeline](#): 13 1114; [Beyondblue](#): 1300 224 636; and [Headspace](#): 1800 650 890.



Wellbeing includes more than your mental health. It also includes your physical and social health.

- [Click to read about volunteering to be interviewed and entering the draw to win prizes >](#)

#### **[Volunteering to be interviewed and entering the draw to win prizes](#)**

At the end of the survey, you will be invited to participate in an interview. The interview is **voluntary**, it's okay if you don't want to participate. If you do wish to take part, you will be asked to leave your name and email address to be contacted later.

After you complete this survey you can enter a **draw** to win one of three Eckersley's Art & Craft gift cards, valued at \$100 and over. To enter the draw, you will be asked to acknowledge the terms and conditions which are provided on the same page. To protect your anonymity associated with your survey responses, you will be taken to a different page to enter your contact information. Your identifying information will be used for the purposes of the prize draw only.

- [Click to read contact details if you are seeking more information >](#)

#### **Principal Investigator:**

Eileen Siddins  
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If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact: Human Ethics, Research Office  
James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811 Phone: (07) 4781 5011 ([ethics@jcu.edu.au](mailto:ethics@jcu.edu.au)).

**If you do not want to participate, thank you for your time. If you do want to participate, please indicate the following:**

1. I understand the aim of this research project is to assess visual art students' wellbeing and mental health needs. Any risks and possible effects of participating in the survey have been explained to my satisfaction.
2. I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the information above. I understand that my participating is voluntary, and I can stop taking part in it at any time without explanation or prejudice.
3. I understand that at the end of the survey I will be invited to leave my name and contact details to volunteer in interviews, and/or to enter a draw. I understand that no information will be used to identify me with this survey without my approval.

Yes, I agree and wish to complete the survey

No, I do not wish to do the survey

**Before you begin, please indicate**

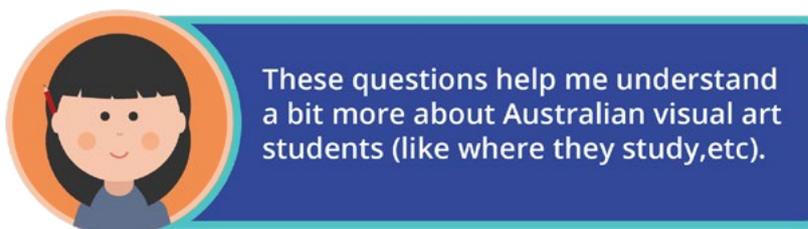
Before you begin, please indicate:

I am currently **enrolled in an Australian undergraduate degree** that teaches one or more of the following visual art disciplines:

- Animation
- Ceramics
- Digital illustration
- Drawing
- Graphic design
- Interactive design
- Painting
- Printmaking (screen, etching or other)
- Sculpture
- Textiles

Yes

No

**Demographic Questions****Demographic Questions**

How would you describe your gender?

Male

- Female
- I'd like to self-describe
- I'd prefer not to say

Feel free to type your description here if you want to

How old are you?

- 15-17 years old
- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old
- 75 years or older

Where do you primarily study in Australia?

- Australian Capital Territory
- New South Wales
- Northern Territory
- Queensland
- South Australia
- Tasmania
- Victoria
- Western Australia

Are you enrolled part-time or full-time?

- Part-time
- Full-time

Please select the **primary** visual art discipline you study (One choice allowed)

- Animation
- Ceramics
- Digital illustration
- Drawing
- Graphic design
- Painting
- Printmaking (screen, etching or other)
- Sculpture
- Textiles
- Other

- Interactive design

**Please explain what your primary visual art discipline is here**

Please select the **secondary** visual art discipline you study (One choice allowed)

- Animation
- Ceramics
- Digital illustration
- Drawing
- Graphic design
- Interactive design
- Painting
- Printmaking (screen, etching or other)
- Sculpture
- Textiles
- I don't have a secondary art discipline
- Other

**Please explain what your secondary visual art discipline is here**

How did you hear about this survey?

- A university staff member invited me
- A university student invited me
- Through a social media post
- From a newsletter
- From the website wellartist.org
- From a friend
- From family
- Other

**Please explain how you heard about this survey here**

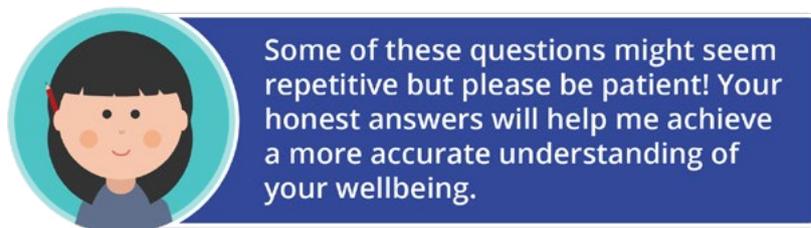


**The PERMA Profiler**

**Wellbeing Questions**

**On a scale of 0 to 10 (0=Never, and 10=Always) please indicate:**

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	(Never)										(Always)
In your visual art study, how often do you feel you are making progress towards your goals?	<input type="radio"/>										
How often do you become absorbed in what you are doing?	<input type="radio"/>										
In general, how often do you feel joyful?	<input type="radio"/>										
In general, how often do you feel anxious?	<input type="radio"/>										
How often do you achieve the important goals you have set for yourself?	<input type="radio"/>										



**Perma1**

**On a scale of 0 to 10 (0=Terrible, and 10=Excellent) please indicate:**

	0 (Terrible)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Excellent)
In general, how would you say your health is?	<input type="radio"/>										



**Perma2**

**On a scale of 0 to 10 (0=Not at all, and 10=Completely) please indicate:**

	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Completely)
In general, to what extent do you lead a purposeful and meaningful life?	<input type="radio"/>										
To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?	<input type="radio"/>										
In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?	<input type="radio"/>										
In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?	<input type="radio"/>										

**Block 15**

**On a scale of 0 to 10 (0=Not at all, and 10=Completely) please indicate:**

	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Completely)
--	-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	--------------------



**On a scale of 0 to 10 (0=Never, and 10=Always) please indicate:**

	0 (Never)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Always)
In general, how often do you feel angry?	<input type="radio"/>										
In general, how often do you feel sad?	<input type="radio"/>										

**Perma5**

**On a scale of 0 to 10 (0=Much worse, and 10=Much better) please indicate:**

	0 (Much Worse)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Much Better)
Compared to others of your same age and gender, how is your health?	<input type="radio"/>										

**Perma6**

**On a scale of 0 to 10 (0=Not at all, and 10=Completely) please indicate:**

	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Completely)
To what extent do you feel loved?	<input type="radio"/>										
To what extent do you generally feel you have a sense of direction in your life?	<input type="radio"/>										
How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?	<input type="radio"/>										
In general, to what extent do you feel contented?	<input type="radio"/>										

Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?

(Not at all)
  1
  2
  3
  4
  5
  6
  7
  8
  9
  10 (Completely)



Only 3 more pages of multiple choice questions to go!

K6

### Psychological Distress Questions



These next questions help me understand your psychological distress and resilience.

On a scale of 1 to 5, please select the number that describes how you have been feeling in the past 30 days:

	1 None of the time	2 A little of the time	3 Some of the time	4 Most of the time	5 All of the time
How often did you feel nervous?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often did you feel hopeless?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often did you feel restless or fidgety?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often did you feel so depressed that nothing could cheer you up?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often did you feel that everything was an effort?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often did you feel worthless?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**The Brief Resilience Scale**

**Resilience Questions**



**On a scale of 1 to 5, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements:**

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually come through difficult times with little trouble	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Block 17**

**On a scale of 1 to 5, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements:**

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
I have a hard time making it through stressful events	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens

1  
Strongly disagree

2  
Disagree

3  
Neutral

4  
Agree

5  
Strongly agree

I tend to take a long time to get over setbacks in my life

### Short Questions

### Short Questions



You made it to this final stage of this survey, woohoo! On this page you can answer questions in your own words (your response is anonymous).

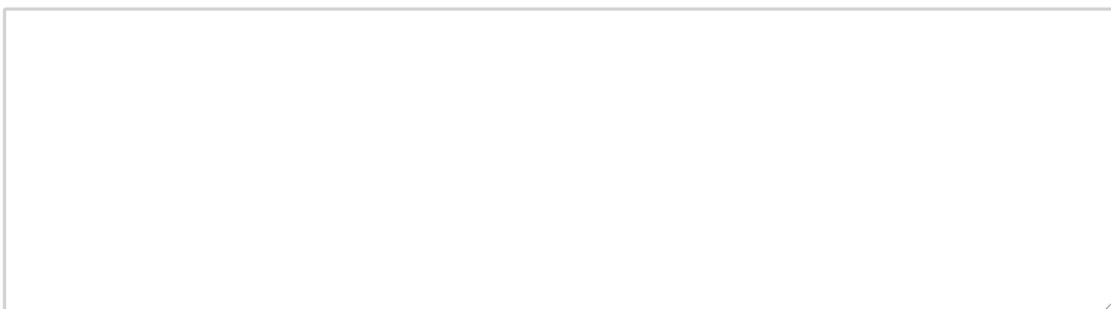
Do you spend much time worrying about what people at university and the broader art community think of you and your art? If so, what do you worry about? (Please explain)

How do you manage when things get tough at university? (For example, you may seek help through: family and friends; university staff; general practitioner or health providers; sport or exercise; gaming; meditation; online apps; alcohol and/or drugs).

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How do you think your degree could be changed to support your mental health and wellbeing?  
(For example, you might want to discuss support, services, curriculum, or other topics relevant to your degree).



Remember, everyone has the right to ask for help if they need it. If you need help, you can access counselling, support or formal health care from qualified professionals in your university. Help is also available through services like [Lifeline](#): 13 1114; [Beyondblue](#): 1300 224 636; [Headspace](#): 1800 650 890; or you can access self-help online apps like [MoodGYM](#) (available at [moodgym.com.au](http://moodgym.com.au)).



Thank you! On the next pages you can volunteer to be interviewed and enter the lottery to win one of three Eckersley's Art & Craft gift cards, valued at \$100 and over.

**You are invited**



## I would like to hear more of your experience as an art student

Thank you for sharing your opinions in the survey. If you are interested in sharing more, you might like to participate further by being interviewed by Principal Investigator Eileen Siddins. In this interview you are welcome to discuss:

1. How your experience as a visual art student influences your wellbeing; and
2. Ways to support visual art students' mental health and wellbeing.

- Yes please, I would like to be contacted about this interview opportunity
- No thanks, I would like to skip to the part where I can enter the draw

If you would like to be interviewed, please leave your name, email address and primary art discipline here:

Name	<input type="text"/>
Email address	<input type="text"/>
Primary visual art discipline	<input type="text"/>

### Entering the draw

## Entering the draw

Thank you for participating in this survey. If you would like to enter the draw to win one of these three prizes, please leave your name and email address below.

- Prize One - **\$250** Eckersley's Art & Craft gift card
- Prize Two - **\$150** Eckersley's Art & Craft gift card
- Prize Three - **\$100** Eckersley's Art & Craft gift card

[Click here to find more about what can be purchased with these cards.](#)

Click to read further terms and conditions about the draw

The details you enter above will **only** be used to enter you into the draw and contact you if you win. Once all draw winners have received their prize, all entries will be deleted permanently.

The draw will be open from August 2018 and closed in February 2019.

The lottery will be fairly drawn by an independent person who can attest the proper conduct of the draw. Prize One will be drawn first, then Prize Two and Three.

The draw will be drawn at 10am, Friday 1 March 2019 at James Cook University, Townsville Campus. Each of the three prize winners will be contacted via email to claim their prize. If they do not claim their prize within two weeks' time, the prize will be drawn again.

Submitting the online survey fulfils the conditions of the entry to the competition.

All entries become the property of the Principal Investigator and will not be returned to participants. Participants who enter into the draw will not be able to withdraw their entry.

If this competition is interfered with in any way or is not capable of being conducted as anticipated due to any reason beyond reasonable control of the Principal Investigator, the Principal Investigator reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to the fullest extent permitted by the law to (a) disqualify any participant; or (b) subject to any written directions from a regulatory authority, to modify, suspend, terminate or cancel the competition, as appropriate.

Except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, the Principal Investigator (including its officers, employees and agents) excludes all liability (including negligence), for any personal injury or any loss or damage (including loss of opportunity), whether direct, indirect, special or consequential, arising in any way out of the competition, including but not limited to, where arising out of the following: (a) any technical difficulties or equipment malfunction (whether or not under the Principal Investigator's control); (b) any theft, unauthorised access or third party interference; (c) any entry or prize claim that is late, lost, altered, damaged or misdirected (whether or not after their receipt by the Principal Investigator) due to any reason beyond the reasonable control of the Principal Investigator; (d) any variation in prize value to that stated in these Terms and Conditions; (e) any tax liability incurred by a winner or entrant; or (f) use of the prize.

Any inquiries about the draw can be addressed to Principal Investigator Eileen Siddins at

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eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au. If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact: Human Ethics, Research Office ethics@jcu.edu.au.

Do you agree to the terms and conditions?

Yes, please submit my contact details

No, I do not want to enter the draw

**Please enter your contact details here**

Name

Email address

Phone number (if applicable)

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## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions are intended to be a base and guide for your interview. The questions may or may not be entirely relevant to you, so you are welcome to adopt a flexible approach to answering them.

Before we begin:

- a. Do you mind sharing your age?
  - b. Which state or territory in Australia do you study in?
  - c. What is your degree?
  - d. What year of your degree are you enrolled in?
  - e. Are you part or full-time?
  - f. What is the primary and secondary art discipline you practice?
    - i. Painting
    - ii. Drawing
    - iii. Print
    - iv. Sculpture
    - v. Ceramics
    - vi. Textiles
    - vii. Graphic Design
    - viii. Interactive Design
    - ix. Digital Illustration
    - x. Animation
  - g. How were you informed of my survey and why did you decide to complete it?
- 
1. What does wellbeing and resilience mean to you?
  
  2. Can you give me an example of when you or another art student has thrived in their degree, despite tough times?
  
  3. How does your own experience at university influence how you look after yourself?



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- 
4. When you encounter problems at university, how do you cope?
  5. How do the staff at university support you and/or other art students?
  6. What could be done to make your degree better?
  7. What else do you need at university to support you?
  8. How can you get the tools you need to look after yourself, even after you graduate?

**Please note:** If any sensitive content including serious issues of harm, or neglect are mentioned during the interview, Principal Investigator Eileen Siddins will be required to report the issue to appropriate help services. If any sensitive content is disclosed during the interview that may indicate your distress, Eileen will respectfully halt the interview and recommend that you seek help from appropriate support services, as discussed in the Information Sheet.



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This research focuses on art students who are learning



**FINE ARTS**

(including painting, drawing, print, sculpture, ceramics, and/or textiles).



**ILLUSTRATION & DESIGN**

(including graphic and interactive design).



**DIGITAL ART**

(Including digital illustration and animation).



**VISUAL ARTS  
WELLBEING**  
AN AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH PROJECT

**Dear art students,**

My name is Eileen, I'm a PhD candidate from James Cook University. I'm looking for undergraduate art students who are currently enrolled in Australian art degrees (majoring in one of the disciplines listed to the left) to help me with my research.

If you are a visual art student, you are invited to share your opinion about the type of mental health and wellbeing needs you have, and how visual art students' wellbeing can be better supported during their degree.



Click the image to watch an animation about the research or check out: [www.wellartist.org](http://www.wellartist.org)

# CAN YOU HELP ME?

Take Survey



Share your opinion to help find ways that might enhance art students' wellbeing during their degree.



Finish the survey and enter a draw to win 1 of 3 Eckersley's Art & Craft gift cards!



If you are interested in this research, contact Eileen: [eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au](mailto:eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au)



You can find more information about this research at: [www.wellartist.org](http://www.wellartist.org)

## If you are a visual art student

One way that you can help me is by completing a **15-20 minute, anonymous survey** that asks questions about your own wellbeing; your psychological distress; resilience; and ways that you think your degree could be changed to benefit your mental health.

Another way that you can help is by volunteering to be interviewed for roughly 30-60 minutes. If you are interested, you can send me an email at: [eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au](mailto:eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au).

The findings from the survey and interviews will contribute to further research that could guide future, positive change in arts higher education. Enhancing art students' mental health could impact the future generations of creative workers, which I think is rather exciting and I hope you do to!

Thank you for your help,  
Eileen Siddins



**VISUAL ARTS  
WELLBEING**  
AN AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH PROJECT

**Eileen will  
interview  
students  
studying:**



**FINE ARTS**

(including painting, drawing, print, sculpture, ceramics, and/or textiles).



**ILLUSTRATION  
& DESIGN**

(including graphic and interactive design).



**DIGITAL ART**

(Including digital illustration and animation).

**Hi there!**

If you are reading this, then you have indicated an interest in being interviewed by Principal Investigator Eileen Siddins. You can find a some quick details about the interview below:

**When:** The interviews are roughly 30-60 minutes long and are held at a day and time that suits you.

**How:** Interviews can be held via Skype, Zoom, telephone or in person according to your location and preference.

**What:** Eileen will ask you questions about what influences your wellbeing in your degree and ways that your course can be changed to benefit your wellbeing.

**Why:** Your opinions will drive any of Eileen's future recommendations to redesign visual art degrees for the benefit of students' mental health and wellbeing.

For more information please read the information sheet attached to your email. Alternatively, you can contact Eileen: [eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au](mailto:eileen.siddins@my.jcu.edu.au) or visit the website [www.wellartist.org](http://www.wellartist.org).





### INFORMATION SHEET: INTERVIEWS

**PROJECT TITLE:** Championing wellbeing in higher education: A needs assessment of mental health in Australian visual art students

You are invited to take part in research project that aims to assess the mental health needs of visual art students in Australian higher education. This research also seeks to recommend ways of improving the wellbeing of visual art students during their degree. The study is being conducted by Principal Investigator Eileen Siddins and will contribute to her PhD degree at James Cook University.

If you agree to be involved in this project, you will be invited to participate in an individual interview to discuss factors that influence your wellbeing while you study your visual art degree. You will also be invited to discuss ways that the degree can be reformed to enhance student wellbeing. The interview should take 30 minutes to 1 hour of your time. If you are located in Townsville the interview can be held at any location for your convenience. Otherwise, Skype or phone communication is an option, depending on what is most suitable for you.

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You can stop taking part in the interview at any time without explanation or prejudice. If you find any of the questions in this interview upsetting you can access counselling, support or formal health care from qualified professionals in your university. Help is also available through services like [Lifeline](#): 13 1114; [Beyondblue](#): 1300 224 636; and [Headspace](#): see website (headspace.org.au).

Your contact details will be strictly confidential at all times – no individual names will be identifiable at any stage. The data from your interview will be collected by audio recording, to be transcribed and used in research publications and conference presentations. Data may also be used in less-formal blog entries or unpublished online reports. You will not be identified in any way in these publications.

If any sensitive content including serious issues of harm, or neglect are mentioned during the interview, Primary Investigator Eileen Siddins will be required to report the issue to appropriate help services. If any sensitive content is disclosed during the interview that may indicate the participant's distress, the investigator will be required to respectfully halt the interview and recommend that the participant seek help from appropriate support services, as discussed in the Information Sheet.

If you have any questions about the interview, please contact Principal Investigator Eileen Siddins. Alternatively, please contact Primary Supervisor Associate Professor Margaret Carter, Secondary Supervisor Professor Ryan Daniel, or Secondary Supervisor Doctor Beryl Buckby.

**Principal Investigator:**  
Eileen Siddins  
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James Cook University  
Email: [Eileen.Siddins@my.jcu.edu.au](mailto:Eileen.Siddins@my.jcu.edu.au)

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James Cook University  
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*If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:*  
Human Ethics, Research Office  
James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811  
Phone: (07) 4781 5011 ([ethics@jcu.edu.au](mailto:ethics@jcu.edu.au))

## APPENDIX 4: ETHICS APPROVAL FORM



**James Cook University**

**Townsville Qld. 4811 Australia**

Dr Anne Swinbourne, Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee

Research Services Ph: 47815011; Fax: 47815521

email: ethics@jcu.edu.au

<b>Human Research Ethics Committee</b>		Application ID
<b>APPROVAL FOR RESEARCH OR TEACHING INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS</b>		<b>H7358</b>
<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</b>	Eileen Siddins	
<b>COLLEGE</b>	Education	
<b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S)</b>		
<b>SUPERVISOR(S)</b>	Margaret Anne Carter, Ryan Daniel and Beryl Buckby	
<b>PROJECT TITLE</b>	Championing wellbeing in higher education: A needs assessment of mental health in Australian visual arts students	
<b>APPROVAL DATE:</b>	<b>22/05/2018</b>	<b>EXPIRY DATE:</b> 30/04/2021
		<b>CATEGORY:</b> 3
<p><b>This project has been allocated Ethics Approval Number H7358, with the following conditions:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All subsequent records and correspondence relating to this project must refer to this number.</li> <li>That there is NO departure from the approved protocols unless prior approval has been sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee.</li> <li>The Principal Investigator must advise the responsible Human Ethics Advisor: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>periodically of the progress of the project,</li> <li>when the project is completed, suspended or prematurely terminated for any reason,</li> <li>within 48 hours of any adverse effects on participants,</li> <li>of any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.</li> </ul> </li> <li>In compliance with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) "National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research" (2007), it is MANDATORY that you provide an annual report on the progress and conduct of your project. This report must detail compliance with approvals granted and any unexpected events or serious adverse effects that may have occurred during the study.</li> </ol>		
<b>Human Ethics Advisor :</b>	Fleischmann, Katja	
<b>Email :</b>	katja.fleischmann@jcu.edu.au	
This project was Approved by Meeting on 18 Apr 2018		
<b>Dr Anne Swinbourne</b> <b>Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee</b>		

## APPENDIX 5: DESCRIPTION OF DATA ANALYSIS

### Appendix 5.1: Development of Transcripts, Initial Coding, and Development of Interpretive Summaries

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This appendix details the development of both interview transcripts and interpretative summaries during analysis, as well as initial stages of coding during the first stage of analysis. As discussed in [Section 4.4.1](#), the interviews were transcribed in late 2018 using clean verbatim (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013) and pre-coding (Saldaña, 2009) with Microsoft Word and NVivo (12 Plus). When using clean verbatim, researchers omit any pauses and filler words to maintain the meaning of data while also increasing trustworthiness and sustaining a rapport with participants during member checking (Carlson, 2010; Guest et al., 2013). Spelling and grammatical errors in the survey participants' short responses were also edited to safeguard their dignity, negotiate the meaning in the text, and uphold deep respect for participants' opinions (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Carlson, 2010). After all, the meaning collected in these responses were far more valuable than the accuracy of participants' spelling and grammar (Carlson, 2010).

When the transcripts were completed, they were rechecked by the researcher and prepared for member checking. In December 2018, these transcripts were emailed to the interview participants for confirmation that the transcripts best represented their perspectives (Birt et al., 2016; Thomas, 2017). The participants were reminded that their identities will continue to be protected, and that open communication was available if they wanted to add more information or change the transcript. Additionally, participants were invited to continue further interaction with the research by checking an interpretation summary of their interview ([Section 4.2.1](#)). Of the 29 interview participants, 15 returned their checked transcripts by February 2019. When participants were asked to check their summary interpretations in June 2019, more participants ( $i=8$ ) took the time to read their transcript, or answer questions that clarified any data that was not transcribed due to phone connection difficulties or inaudible recording.

Each transcript was first individually coded in chronological order by using the interpretive forms ([Section 4.2.1](#), [Appendix 7](#)) and highlighting codes in Microsoft Word. These transcripts were then reread, and the codes checked twice more out of order to ensure all content in the interpretive forms aligned with the research objectives, and the written interpretative summary narratives aligned with participants' opinions. At times, the audio recordings were revisited when it was necessary to check the context and tone in participants conversation. The highlighted holistic codes were brought together as a whole by using a coding map ([Figure A1](#); Saldaña, 2009). As explained in [Section 4.4.1](#), this coding map served as both a composite image of patterns in the data and a table of content that was refined as coding progressed (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). This refinement was guided by checking how relevant the codes were to the research objectives ([Section 4.4.1](#)).

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In the meantime, the interpretive interview summaries were completed and emailed to 26 participants ([Section 4.2.1](#)). Of the 26 participants who received an interpretation, 21 replied by email, yielding a response rate of 80.77%. This response rate was higher than the response rate of participants who checked their interview transcripts earlier in the year (55.17%). It was also higher than typically low response rates for member checking (Thomas, 2017). In their responses, many of the interview participants ( $i=11$ ) described their interpretations as acceptable, using words like ‘perfect’, ‘accurate’ and ‘interesting’. Some participants ( $n=5$ ) used the email to provide an update on their student life, highlighting changes in the way that they now understood and overcame their own challenges, and successes they have recently experienced in their student life. Although power issues may influence these positive responses ([Section 4.2.1](#)), responses such as these suggest that participant’s involvement in this knowledge production influenced their resilience and competence (Chase, 2017).

This stage of member checking provided further opportunities to verify how participants were represented in the research findings (Buchbinder, 2010). For example, one participant (Louise, design) agreed that the interpretation represented her views, but also expressed caution regarding any holistic or band-aid approaches to change that are not incorporated into the curriculum:

---

“ Weaving these constructs into the fabric of the degree rather than as an option if/when a student is not feeling well promotes normalisation (Louise, Interview Participant).

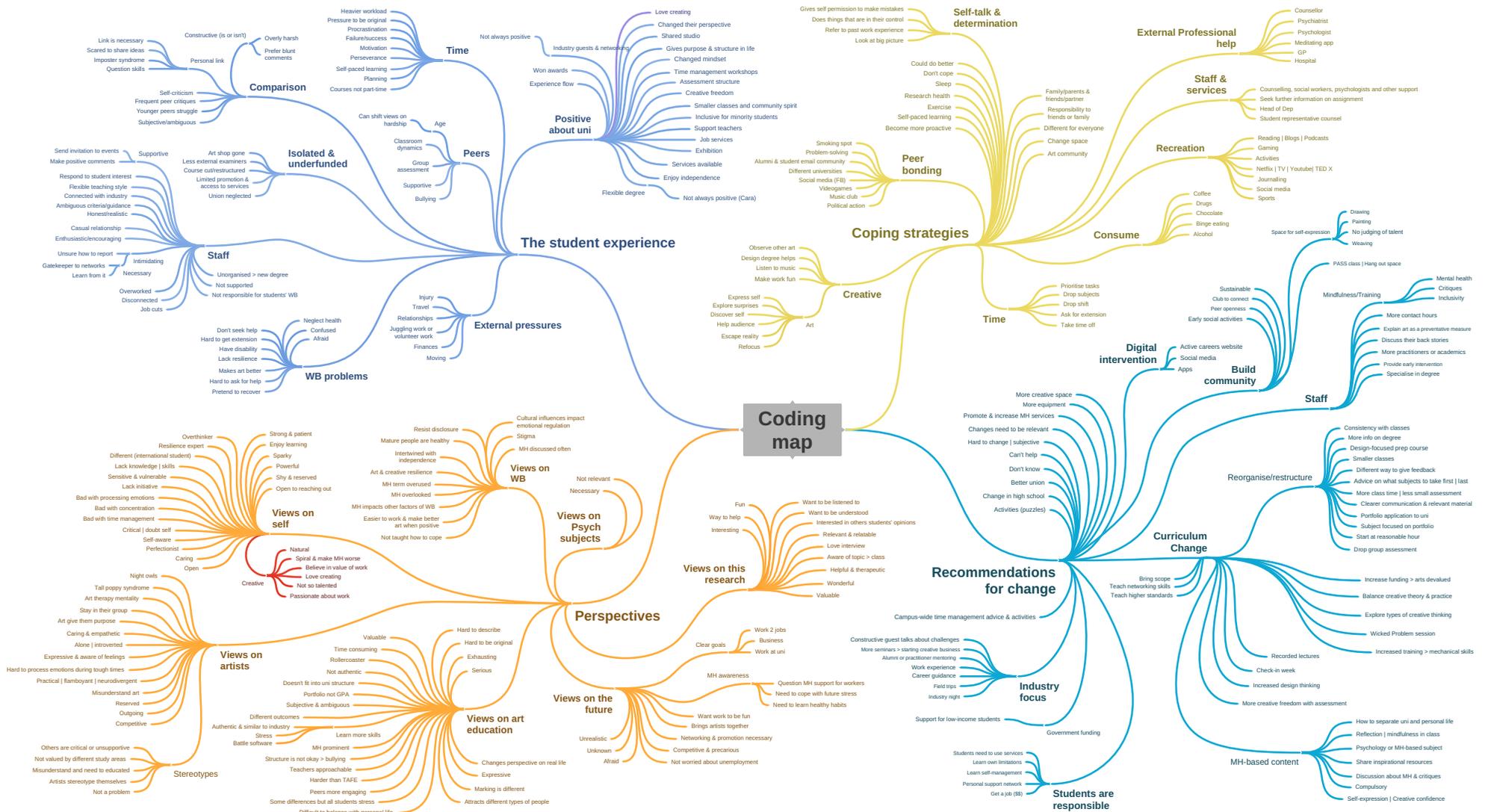
---

Any additional information sent by these interview participants was uploaded to NVivo for analysis. By the time the participant checks were completed, all interview transcripts had been individually analysed and transferred into NVivo for pattern coding across the entire data

set (Bazeley, 2013; Saldaña, 2009). The coding map below ([Figure A1](#)) also reached an adequate representation of the interview data and was subsequently used to develop a codebook ([Appendix 6](#)).

**Figure A1**

Map of codes that emerged from the initial analysis of interview data



## Appendix 5.2: Development of Codebook and Coding Schema

---

This appendix provides a detailed description and rationale for the development of the codebook, including the coding schema for content analysis. Codebooks can provide ways to easily access “evidence for verifying the trustworthiness” of research (Mackieson, Shlonsky, & Connolly, 2018, p. 14). Considered as the most critical tool in applied thematic analysis, this codebook underwent multiple revisions as analysis progressed (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The codebook played a key role in ensuring the sequential ‘fit’ of narrative themes by defining and assembling them into meta-themes that reflected both the research objectives and the main narrative of the findings ([Section 4.5](#); Saldaña, 2009). These meta-themes described the participant’s experiences as a university student, how these experiences impacted their wellbeing, and participants’ recommendations to improve and sustain Australian visual art students’ wellbeing through their higher education. [Table 4.1](#) presents the narrative themes, meta-themes

and brief definition of these themes that are further detailed in the codebook ([Appendix 6](#)).

In stage two of the data analysis, the qualitative data were transformed using content analysis ([Section 4.4.2](#)). When appropriate, content analysis can provide a way to engage deeper with data and increase understanding of the research findings (Krippendorff, 2013; Yin, 2016). The research data provided ample opportunity to draw from existing wellbeing and resilience theories and count how frequently participants mentioned observable features of their current wellbeing—in co-occurrence with the narrative themes highlighted in the same text. A matrix table was used to display the relative code frequencies and visualise the overall thematic importance between coding themes (Guest, MacQueen, & Narney, 2012). This was achieved by visualising a comparison of narrative themes and observable features of wellbeing themes, otherwise called wellbeing domains ([Section 4.4.2.1](#)).

The research design accommodated this decision to create frequency themes. To ensure more direct comparisons during integration, the data were collected concurrently from the same sample of visual art students (Creswell, Plano Clark, & Garrett, 2008). A majority of these participants (s=210) answered all survey open questions—questions that addressed concepts similar to those asked in the interviews ([Section 3.5.4.4](#)). Although the interviews were semi-structured, content analysis can be used to process unstructured and context-sensitive data that is representational to others (Krippendorff, 2013). Therefore, the data from both Survey and Interview Strands were comparable and the frequency of codes could be counted across the entire data landscape. This data landscape, like the overarching research question, generated a sufficient range of positive and negative opinions about phenomena (Mertens, 2003), which guided the definition of wellbeing domain values ([Table 4.2](#)).

---

All qualitative data were coded into the narrative themes and wellbeing domains by the researcher with regular meetings and feedback from her supervisors. When categorising data into wellbeing domains, this feedback guided the revision of the coding schema, located in the codebook ([Appendix 6](#)). Often, these supervisor meetings addressed the ubiquitous and multidimensional nature of the wellbeing domains (Seligman 2011) and included topics such as interpreting what participants meant when observable wellbeing features were identified, how units of data can often be coded across various domains, or if data should be coded at all. Any coding decisions that were particularly challenging were scrutinised on a regular basis, which helped to crystalize definitions in the codebook (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Details of this analysis process were recorded in the researcher's journal and supervisor meeting minutes.

The coding schema for the wellbeing domains was developed by using abductive methods

(Bazeley, 2013). Each wellbeing domain was first defined using wellbeing and resilience theories. Resources such as Butler and Kern's PERMA Item bank (2016) guided the choice of words used in the coding schema (see reference list in [Appendix 6](#)). When coding the qualitative data using the wellbeing features themes derived from questionnaire items, another wellbeing feature emerged. Returning to deductive methods and allowing the data to inform the coding schema thus identified the wellbeing feature: self-esteem (Hewitt, 2005; Huppert & So, 2013). Following this addition, the values for each wellbeing domain were identified (Neuendorf, 2017). Throughout the final stages of analysis, the codebooks' operational definitions continued to be refined by exploring the data and confirming coding decisions using theory (Bernard, Wuitch, & Ryan, 2017; Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013).

Wellbeing features are multidimensional, and people cannot be simply identified as possessing or not possessing these features. For example,

no individual can be labelled as resilient or not resilient (Van Breda, 2018). Participants' responses to the survey and interview questions are theoretically infinite and in no way can the lack of wellbeing features identified in one participant's response indicate a low presence of the domain (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Indeed, people can be situated along a broad continuum of wellbeing at different times in their life, according to how the external and internal contexts fluctuate in their life (Baik et al., 2017; Keyes, 2002). It is also possible for each research participant to demonstrate multiple features of wellbeing. For example, data coded in the *Relationships* domain were often accompanied by other wellbeing features (Seligman, 2011). This crossover between multiple domains depends on various factors, including when the data were collected, the context of the participant's discussion, and their views on the content they discuss (Butler & Kern, 2016; Iarossi, 2006).

Given the multidimensional nature of phenomena counted in this data, the coding

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schema was essential for maintaining coding consistency. By providing detailed criteria for the wellbeing domains and values, the schema also mitigated unnecessary crossovers between domains. This was achieved by identifying the similarities and differences between domains and how this related to data collected from visual art students. For example, a key difference between the *Engagement* and *Accomplishment* domain was that data needed to refer to the participant's process when engaged in a task (*Engagement*), rather than the outcomes of that task (*Accomplishment*). The key theory-guided differences between each domain were visualised using a figure in the codebook ([Figure A2](#)) and were outlined in more detail using the coding schema. This schema includes references to relevant theory and representative quotes.

When counting phenomena in data that is social in nature, it is typical for the data to yield multiple interpretations (Krippendorff, 2013). Although this can be problematic, creating values for each wellbeing domain helped to clarify the

continuum of meaning flowing between each domain extreme (e.g., very low and very high levels of resilience) by anchoring polar opposites of meaning such as scales of measurement (Krippendorff, 2013). Hence, dichotomous values, representing the high or low presence of wellbeing domains, were established. The 'high' values listed in [Table 4.2](#) are similar to a majority of wellbeing features identified by Huppert & So (2013), who judged these positive features as the polar opposite symptoms of common mental health disorders that can inhibit peoples' everyday functioning (i.e., depression and anxiety). Subsequently, each value listed beside the positive value in [Table 4.2](#) indicates when wellbeing features are low, which can negatively influence the participant's daily functioning.

The wellbeing domain values were established so that they could be disaggregated or collapsed (Epstein & Martin, 2005). At first, the two high and low values were split into four values (very high, high, low, very low) to create

more concrete definitions for each wellbeing domain continuum (Epstein & Martin, 2005; Neuendorf, 2017). These definitions are located in [Appendix 6](#). The *very high* and *very low* values represented data that were more manifestly related to the wellbeing domain in terms of intensity and duration, whereas the high and low values—positioned closer to a neutral point in each domain continuum—represented latent data that possessed less specific or indirect representations of the wellbeing domain. Once all value definitions were finalised and checked by supervisors, the four values were once again collapsed into two values (Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2017) to retain the definitions of all split values and reduce code complexity (Campbell et al., 2013).

As coding progressed, additional values for the *Resilience* wellbeing domain were identified. The coding scheme for Resilience was initially quite strict because recovery and coping strategies are recognised as conceptually different from resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). This

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restricted the *Resilience* criteria so data could only be coded if the participant mentioned whether or not their daily functioning had been affected by a challenge, how they responded to the challenge in a short period of time, and the outcomes of their response. However, this prevented the coding of other data relevant to resilience, including participants who gradually recovered from challenges, withstood continued challenges, or only mentioned their coping strategies (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Richardson, 2002; Van Breda, 2018). Hence, codes called *Grit* (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), *Adaptive coping* (Wu et al., 2013), *Recovery* (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), *Survival* (Bonanno, 2008), and *Maladaptive coping* (Denovan & Macaskill) were identified.

All resilience-related codes were aggregated with the *Resilience* domain values ([Appendix 6](#)). This process helped to retain the definitions of all split values displayed under the *Resilience* domain schema, while also decreasing the complexity of codes and thus the chance for coding error

(Campbell et al., 2013). The detailed coding schema for *Grit*, *Adaptive coping*, and *Recovery* were thus merged with the high *Resilience* value (Resilience). Likewise, the coding scheme for *Survival* and *Maladaptive coping* were merged with the low *Resilience* value (*Vulnerability*). Moreover, a similar process was used to identify the self-orientated *Perfectionism* code (Curran & Hill, 2019) and aggregate it into the low *Accomplishment* value. Further details about the value schema can be found in [Appendix 6](#).

The multidimensional nature of wellbeing features also influenced how qualitative data were coded into the values. At times, data units were coded into different high and low values (e.g., *Resilience* and *Unpleasant emotions*) because participants demonstrated more than one observable feature of wellbeing. Indeed, some units were coded into both values of the same domain, such as *Emotions*, because high and low levels of emotions can be experienced at the same time (Butler & Kern, 2016). To accommodate this complexity and remain

sensitive to power relationships constructed through the choice of language (Fook & Gardner, 2007), the names of the values were altered to demonstrate how it is normal for participants to be positioned and repositioned at different points on the wellbeing continuum. For example, the *Emotion* values were called *Pleasant* or *Unpleasant*, not only to capture both major and general descriptions of emotion (Diener et al., 2010) but to imply how it is common for humans to feel negative emotions and compromised mental health (Ashfield, Macdonald, Francis, & Smith, 2017; Baik et al., 2017). Likewise, the *Relationship* values were dubbed *Supportive* and *Unsupportive* to deter unnecessary labels of what is considered a ‘negative’ relationship, and represent how commonly the word ‘support’ was coded in these values.

Once all data were coded into the wellbeing domains, the codes and schema were checked and rechecked before proceeding with data reduction. Next, the relative frequency—or the number of participants who were coded into

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both a narrative theme and wellbeing domain—was counted (Guest, MacQueen, & Narney, 2012) and presented in a matrix table. This was done to explore the relationship between observed features of wellbeing when participants discussed their university experience. To provide a summary of the narrative theme findings, this matrix was split into two parts ([Table 5.5](#) and [Table 6.2](#)) and distributed throughout the findings chapter. The narrative themes called *Views on MH*, *Views on Coping*, *Views on change*, *Department-wide change*, *Curricula change*, and *Industry change* were not displayed in these tables because they did not comprehensively contribute to the discussion (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

While the joint displays were developed during stage three of analysis ([Section 4.4.3](#)), the codebook definitions continued to be refined using theoretical organisation (Saldaña, 2009). For example, the coping narrative theme names and definitions were slightly changed after reviewing coping classification literature (Skinner,

Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003) to link these codes with theoretical models (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Hence, the labels *Cognitive coping* and *Behavioural coping* ([Table 4.1](#)) were used to describe these themes because the data aligned with categories defined in Latack and Havlovic’s classification (1992). Ensuring that the codebook definitions were an exhaustive and clear representation of the coded data helped increase coding reliability (Epstein & Martin, 2005). Therefore, the codebook was not only a critical tool for consistently executing qualitative analysis but also for demonstrating the rigour of analysis processes for other researchers to consider before replication (Bazeley, 2013; Mackieson et al., 2018).

Alternative methods of checking the reliability of coding were used to acquire intercoder agreement (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The reliability of coding was checked regularly by supervisors through a process similar to Creswell and Miller’s peer review (2000) and by testing intrarater reliability (Mackey, Mackey, Gass, &

Gass, 2005). To calculate intrarater reliability, four interview transcripts and the survey short responses of four participants were recoded after two months had passed (Guest et al., 2012; Mackey et al., 2005). Hence, the researcher acted as both primary and secondary coder (Guest et al., 2012). Cohen’s kappa was used to determine the agreement between the researcher as primary coder to the researcher as secondary coder. The results from this check indicated a moderate agreement between coders for both the narrative themes and the wellbeing domains ( $\kappa=0.67$ ). These moderate results suggest that confidence can be placed in the study results (McHugh, 2012), yet future intercoder testing and revision are paramount if the operational definitions are to be replicated.

# Codebook

The following themes are developed through analysis of qualitative data from the interviews and survey short responses. Each theme is colour-coded, and sequentially ordered as discussed in [Section 4.4.1](#). The themes are sorted into two groups, **narrative themes** (including the description of participants' experience at university and their recommendations) and **wellbeing domains**. Each wellbeing domain possesses two variables that represent a dichotomous cut-off point between "high" and "low" wellbeing attributes.

The names of these themes and subthemes are listed below and described throughout the remainder of the document. The purpose of these descriptions is not to reduce the ambiguity of the raw data, but clarify the coding process (Guest et al., 2012). A comprehensive reference list of all literature used to develop the wellbeing domain descriptions can be found at the end of this document.

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### **Narrative Themes: Description of participants' experiences at university**

Views on research  
Views on MH  
University experience  
Staff  
Peers  
Time  
Creative learning  
Comparison  
Future  
Identity

### **Narrative Themes: Description of participant's wellbeing**

Impacts  
Views on Coping  
Cognitive coping  
Behavioural coping  
Social coping

### **Narrative themes: Description of participant recommendations**

Views on change  
Department-wide change  
Curricula change  
Industry change

### **Wellbeing domains (frequency codes to be compared with the above narrative themes)**

Emotions (Pleasant and Unpleasant)  
Engagement (Engaged and Disengaged)  
Relationships (Supportive and Unsupportive)  
Meaning (Meaning and Low meaning)  
Accomplishment (Accomplishment and Low accomplishment)  
Physical health (Good and poor)  
Resilience (Resilience and Vulnerability)  
Self-esteem (Self-esteem and Low self-esteem)

### **References ([to navigate to the reference list, click here](#))**

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## Narrative Themes: Description of Participants' Experiences at University

### Theme: VIEWS ON RESEARCH (V.RE)

**Brief definition:** Views on research and motivations to participate in this research

**Full definition:** Participants' perspectives on the survey, interviews, or research in general. This includes any reasons why the participants were motivated to volunteer.

**When to use:** Any specific mention of what participants thought of the research and why they decided to participate in the project.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that detailed how the research was promoted and sent to students or how they completed the survey. Do not use when participant referred to their experience with mental health difficulties at university (*Impacts*).

**Example:** "I've definitely enjoyed the interview. It's been kind of therapeutic for me as well."

### Theme: VIEWS ON MH (V.MH)

**Brief definition:** General comments on mental health and wellbeing

**Full definition:** Opinions about wellbeing, mental health and resilience in relation to the self, artists, students, and society in general.

**When to use:** Code data that referred to general opinions or comments on what the participants or other people thought of mental health. Data might include how participants defined wellbeing and resilience, comments about their own physical health, and conversation about stigma and other peoples' perspectives on wellbeing. *There might be some overlap with Views on MH and Creative Learning codes, where participants discuss mental health and creativity.*

**When to not use:** Do not code when the participants specifically referred to their own personal experience with mental health (*Impacts*). Perspectives alone should be used here. Refrain from coding data about how participants used their mental health difficulties to influence their creative process and outcomes (*Impacts*).

**Example:** "I know that mental health still has a big, big, stigma behind it."

### Theme: UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE (UNI.XP)

**Brief definition:** Being a university student (not related to studying art)

**Full definition:** Overview of the participants' general experience as a university student, including the structure of their education and how external stressors impacted their university experiences

**When to use:** Data should include content about art students' campus locations, university budget, university services, education system, course structure, assessment, classes, equipment and resources. Data should also include any external commitments, obligations or pressures that competed with the participants' time at university. This might include external relationships, living situations, finances, work, travel, injury or volunteer work.

**When to not use:** Do not use data that was not specific to the participants' educational experience (e.g., demographic data) or when they referred to staff or student relationships and actions (*Staff, Peers*). Do not code if students referred to time (*Time*) or when they discussed experiences that are unique to creative learning (*C.Learn., Critiques, Future, Identity*). Do not code data that referenced the need for

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improved services ([Dep.Change](#)) or recommended change for broader university issues ([V.Change](#)).

**Example:** “Then as of this year the funding has been cut at a federal level so it’s not viable for TAFE to continue that or deliver that unfortunately”

“Um, I think being at university helps with my structure.”

“I did struggle with last year because I was financially struggling.”

## **Theme: STAFF**

**Brief definition:** Students’ relationships with staff at uni

**Full definition:** Participants’ interactions with teaching, administration and support staff that formed a part of their university experience.

**When to use:** Data can include student views on staff work lives, the type of services they provided and how they delivered these services to the students. Also include descriptions of good or bad student interactions with staff by coding topics such as the teachers’ approaches to teaching, conversations in or outside of the classroom, and student efforts to interact with staff.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to how participants talked to staff as a way to cope with challenges that impact their wellbeing ([Connect](#)). Do not code data primarily focussed on participant interactions with fellow students ([Peers](#)) or any data that referred to experiences that are unique to art students ([C.Learn.](#)) this includes data about specific interactions relevant to art critiques ([Comparison](#)) and time management ([Time](#)). Do not code data about the ambiguity or subjectiveness of teachers’ creative guidance ([C.Learn.](#)).

**Examples:** “The teachers, they also treat you like their own friends.”

“She uses a lot of criticism and we all sort of flip out because we don’t know we were supposed to prepare for things like that.”

## **Theme: PEERS**

**Brief definition:** Students’ relationships with other students at uni

**Full definition:** Participants’ interactions with students from their cohort, students from different disciplines or students from different universities.

**When to use:** Data can include the participants’ views on peer bonding or views on the age or personalities of their peers. Any stories about group assessment, classroom dynamics (relevant to peers) and conversations with peers about university can be coded here.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that was a direct response to questions about coping, or directly referred to coping with pressures ([Connect](#)). Do not code comments about students receiving feedback or comparing their work with other students ([Comparison](#)).

**Example:** “I mean, it’s hard because I’ve had some bad groups, but I’ve also had some really, really good groups.”

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## Theme: TIME

**Brief definition:** Views on, or experiences with, time management

**Full definition:** Participants' references to how they managed their time as a university student.

**When to use:** Data can include the participants' perspectives on what is considered healthy or unhealthy management of time. Code data that referred to the participants' views on their or other students' time management and how they pushed through time challenges. Data that referenced the management of heavier workloads, procrastination and planning can be included here. Any comments made on motivation, planning and perseverance (related to time management) should also be included. *There will be crossovers between Time and the next theme, Creative learning. However, participant comments relating to how art students have to manage time differently should still be coded here.*

**When to not use:** Refrain from coding data that referred to another student's age (Peers). Refrain from coding data that referred to how this caused stress (Impacts) or comments about managing time in the workforce (Future). Do not code data that was a direct response to questions about coping, or directly referred to coping with pressures (Behaviour).

**Example:** "It's like, 'You don't have time to chill!' Yeah."

## Theme: CREATIVE LEARNING (C.Learn)

**Brief definition:** Views on higher creative education

**Full definition:** Participants' views on the differences and similarities between creative learning and learning in other study areas (e.g., engineering, law, business or science students).

**When to use:** Code data including participant perspectives on their experiences with university compared to other students from different study areas, no matter how unsure they were of whether their perspectives were 'true'. Code data that indicated participants' views on being asked to compare different study experiences. The data in this theme may outline the ambiguity and subjectiveness of art education or learning new software or art techniques and skills. It can also include comments about differences in views about art practice. Code general data that serves as an introduction to the overall theme and does not relate to time, critiques, stereotypes, identity or the future. *There might be some overlap with Views on MH and Creative Learning codes because participants explicitly discussed mental health within the context of creative learning.*

**When to not use:** Do not code data that specifically related to art critiques, feedback, or comparison of artwork (Comparison). Additionally, do not code references to time management (Time); social labels, myths, stigma or stereotypes about artists (Identity), and references to life after graduation (Future).

**Example:** "Art is such an ambiguous subject, it's not like an essay where you can give a rubric and have a pretty good idea of what mark you'd get."

## Theme: COMPARISON

**Brief definition:** Art students' received feedback and comparison of artwork

**Full definition:** When the participants, university staff, peers, or an audience external to university made comments about art students' artwork.

**When to use:** Code data that related to participants' comparison of their work with others, or comments describing how the participants have responded to the feedback of others. This data can relate to competitiveness between art students, art graduates, or art practitioners. Code data about critical feedback that other artists received, participants' self-criticism, or when participants mentioned that they

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did not worry about how people perceive their art. Data may refer to how the comments made about the participant's artwork were subjective, ambiguous, personal or constructive, or how there was a lack of feedback.

**When to not use:** Refrain from coding data that referred to another student's age (**Peers**) or stereotypes and labels related to society's criticism of art (**Identity**) or when participants reflected on their future with regards to this topic (**Future**). If there was no specific reference to the teacher's feedback, refrain from coding data that relates to ambiguous or incoherent assessment criteria (**C.Learn**) and refrain from coding participants' suggestions to improve this criteria to enhance art students' wellbeing (**Curricula**).

**Example:** "I know when I first started and we'd have critiques, they were obviously a real point of anxiety for some people".

## **Theme: FUTURE**

**Brief definition:** Participants' views about the future

**Full definition:** Participants' comments about their career trajectories and life after graduating from their creative degree.

**When to use:** Code any opinions about the participants' prospective art industry, including views on networking and potential jobs. Also, code references to art graduates and the participants' plans for the future once they finish their education.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to the participant's current university experience (**UNI. XP, C.Learn**) or data that referred to opinions about current students (**Peers**). If there is no mention of the participants' views on their future, do not code data that specifically referred to the participants' recommendation for change in their degree to help them prepare for life after graduation (**Industry**).

**Example:** "I've actually finished, yeah. [This] was my last semester and, "Oh no!" [laughs] I am now an unemployed person, [laughs]."

## **Theme: IDENTITY**

**Brief definition:** Participants' views in creative identity

**Full definition:** Any data that indicated participants' views on their identity as an artist, or other peoples' views on artists.

**When to use:** Data can include the participants' relationship with their art, their views on what it means to be a 'good' artist and any desires to educate people on what it means to be an artist. Finally, include any mention of whether or not people hold stereotypes over artists, and what those stereotypes might be.

**When to not use:** Do not code any data that referred to participants' work in the creative industries after graduation (**Future**). Do not code data that referred more broadly to the participant's art education (**Creative learning**).

**Example:** "It's the best thing that we can really do for the world, is to be artists. The world doesn't necessarily see it like that, but."

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## Narrative Themes: Description of Participants' Wellbeing, Including their Mental Health and Resilience

### Theme: IMPACTS

**Brief definition:** Impacts on wellbeing

**Full definition:** Data exploring how the university experiences can, or did, impact the participants' wellbeing.

**When to use:** Data can include any comments that indicated the participants' observable features of wellbeing as an art student, including negative features (tired, sore, anxious, depressed, vulnerable, disconcerted) and positive features (happy, inspired, healthy, strong, resilient, confident). Instances when the participants or their peers succeeded or failed, were engaged or disengaged, or discussed the meaning of their university experience should be coded here—if the data relates to a direct impact on their wellbeing. Include comments that indicated when the participants have neglected their health or have used their mental health problems as a way to influence their artwork. Code comments about overthinking and responses that indicated a professional's diagnosis of mental or physical health problems. References to how participants have viewed their overarching experience with physical or mental health difficulties at university should also be included here.

**When to not use:** Refrain from coding stories where participants discussed mental or physical health problems external to their university experience, *unless it specifically relates to their current experience as university students* (does the coded data stand on its own in this category? If in doubt, code with **UNI.XP**). Do not code data that indicated the participants' opinions about wellbeing or mental health (**V.MH**) rather than their experience.

**Example:** "It is very tricky that the artwork will [be] better in my worst period than other time. So, I think my bad emotion always evoke my inspirations and give me surprises."

"That's when I was diagnosed with it. It was mainly a factor of uni, my worth in my degree."

### Theme: VIEWS ON COPING (V.COPE)

**Brief definition:** General comments about coping with university challenges

**Full definition:** The participants' broader references to coping with university challenges that did not specifically outline coping strategies

**When to use:** Data can include the participants' views on whether or not they or their peers used different strategies, do not cope, or could do better. Any data that provides insight into what participants thought coping means should also be coded here.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to specific strategies used, or participant comments about whether specific strategies were useful (**Cognitive, Behaviour, Social**). As an example, do not code when participants were discussing any barriers for students seeking help from staff (**Social**) or comments on the responsibility of students to seek help from staff or vice versa (**V.Change**).

**Example:** "Quite frankly, I don't cope. I was never taught how to cope."

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## **Theme: Cognitive coping (Cognitive)**

**Brief definition:** Participants use cognitive regulation to help cope with challenges

**Full definition:** When participants used mental strategies and self-talk to cope with their university challenges.

**When to use:** Data should be coded here if they relate to coping strategies that are used internally, as an expression of the participants' thoughts and decisions. Any participant stories about other students who have similarly coped with challenges can be coded here. Include examples of coping that the participant refers to even if they aren't sure if it helps them. This includes strategies that can be maladaptive, such as persisting with university work despite intensely unhealthy impacts on wellbeing.

**When to not use:** Do not code any coping strategies that are used on an external basis (**Behaviour, Social**).

**Example:** "And I try and step back from the situation. Sort of, try and logic it out."

## **Theme: BEHAVIOURAL COPING (Behaviour)**

**Brief definition:** Personal strategies used to help cope with challenges

**Full definition:** When participants took action and physically did something, other than seeking help from others, to cope with challenges.

**When to use:** Data can include taking time out, art, hobbies, activities, sports, research, reading, eating, substance use, sleeping or any form of change to help participants manage their wellbeing. Any participant stories about other students who have similarly coped with challenges can be coded here. Code examples of coping that the participants' used, even if they were not sure if it helped them. This includes strategies that can be maladaptive, such as procrastinating until after a deadline.

**When to not use:** Do not code when participants referred to supportive relationships, seeking connections or help from other people (**Social**). Do not use when data referred to internal reasoning, thinking or feeling through problems (**Cognitive**). Refrain from coding data that referred to time management if the participant did not mention that they used this strategy to cope with challenges (**Time**).

**Example:** "I've found a lot of them actually listen to music, they find that helpful. A few people tell me they watch Youtube videos in the background while animating."

## **Theme: SOCIAL COPING (Social)**

**Brief definition:** Relational strategies used to help cope with challenges

**Full definition:** When participants referred to social connectivity as a way for them to cope with their university challenges

**When to use:** Code data that relates to how art students used social interaction to cope with challenges. Data can include seeking out professional health services in university or external to the university. Relationships with family and friends, guidance or support from teaching staff, and time spent with peers should also be coded here. Include any participant stories about other students who coped with challenges by connecting with others. Code examples of coping that the participant used even if they are not sure if it helps them, or times when their help-seeking process was obstructed by certain motivational or time barriers and unsupportive behaviour. Include data that suggests maladaptive social coping, such as procrastinating with friends. Finally, code data about participants who were unable to seek help because they had limited access to services or networks. *There will be some overlap between*

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*Social coping and Department-wide change because participants often referred to help-seeking barriers while requesting improved services at uni.*

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to personal coping strategies that are performed individually or without planned social interaction (**Behaviour**). Do not use when data referred to internal reasoning, thinking or feeling through problems (**Cognitive**) Do not code conversations about the responsibility of teaching staff to support students' mental health (**V.Change**).

**Example:** "It sounds silly, but [the] Facebook group chat made a big difference."

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## Narrative Themes: Description of Participants' Recommendations

### Theme: VIEWS ON CHANGE (V.Change)

**Brief definition:** General comments about changing the education system

**Full definition:** Participant comments on changing university education that were not specific recommendations or cannot be easily implemented into art education.

**When to use:** Data can include participant views on improving art students' university experience, but their views were not primarily or necessarily the art department's responsibility. Additionally, these views might sit outside the domain of university. Code data that related to intervention in high school, more government funding for student accommodation, or requests for general respect and acknowledgment from the government that art education is important. Include referred to how students are responsible for coping with challenges. Additionally, code data that suggested that the participants did not think changes can help, or that it will be hard to implement relevant, effective and sustainable change.

**When to not use:** Do not code recommendations that can be practically implemented on a university or department level ([Dep.Change](#)). Do not code practicable recommendations relevant to the participant's prospective industry ([Industry](#)) or improving the way their art is taught and assessed ([Curricula](#)). Refrain from coding comments that were not a direct response to a question about improving art students' university experience. For example, do not code comments about how challenges ([UNI.XP](#), [C.Learn](#), etc.) can impact student's health ([Impacts](#)).

**Example:** "I think more accessible funding from the government for students, so they can study and not have to work."

### Theme: DEPARTMENT-WIDE CHANGE (Dep.Change)

**Brief definition:** Recommendations for change within the arts department and university as a whole

**Full definition:** Specific recommendations that can benefit a larger body of students and staff in the art department.

**When to use:** Data can include proposals for change that were focussed on improving the experience for (art) students across different disciplines. Given there are few whole-of-university approaches that were mentioned by participants, data can also include change that impacts all students and staff in the university, across different study areas. Code any mention of staff training, community-building activities, drop-in workshops, or improvement of unions and support services. Also include examples of effective changes already implemented by the student's university or art department.

**When to not use:** Do not code general comments about change and proposals that were not practicable or sat outside the scope of the university ([V.Change](#)). Do not code recommendations relevant to the participants' prospective industry ([Industry](#)), or recommendations that related to the way art is taught and assessed ([Curricula](#)). Refrain from coding comments that were not a direct response to a question about changing or improving art students' university experience. For example, do not code comments about how university or creative learning challenges ([UNI.XP](#), [C.Learn](#), etc.) can impact student's health ([Impacts](#)).

**Example:** "Like being about to go to some sort of room and have an activity to say, "Hey this is your time to express how you want to express how you're feeling."

"I could say meditation would be good. I think we need to understand our bodies more, like, the limitations."

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## **Theme: CURRICULA CHANGE (CURRICULA)**

**Brief definition:** Recommendations to improve the art students' experience with their degree

**Full definition:** Specific recommendations to improve the way that visual art is taught and assessed

**When to use:** Code data that relates to how teachers can improve the way they deliver content during class hours and outside of class. The data can include proposals for changing the time and size of classes, the way that subjects are organised in sequence and interconnected within the degree, and participants' self-paced learning outside of the classroom. Examples might include conversations about theory and practice, assessment feedback, student feedback sessions, teaching positive content about students' mental health, and advice on what the degree subjects are about. Data can also include examples of effective curricula changes that were already implemented into participants or other student's degrees.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred specifically to industry-focussed recommendations ([Industry](#)), changes that can practicably benefit students and staff within the entire university or arts department ([Dep.Change](#)) or general comments about change and proposals that were not practicable and sat outside the scope of university ([V.Change](#)). Refrain from coding comments that were not a direct response to a question about improving art students' university experience.

**Example:** "Podcasts, tutorials closer to lectures, lectures later in the day, less stress & more group activities where the staff pick the groups not the students"

"More staggered assessment so not so much is due at once"

## **Theme: INDUSTRY CHANGE (INDUSTRY)**

**Brief definition:** Recommendations relevant to participants' prospective industry

**Full definition:** Specific recommendations that focussed on participants understanding the creative industries and working in their chosen creative industry.

**When to use:** Data can include proposals for department-wide changes or change in curricula, but they need to have an industry focus. Data can include suggestions for more work experience, career guidance, field trips, mentoring, guest talks and networking events. Data can also include examples of industry engagement that were already available or are implemented into art student's curricula.

**When to not use:** Do not code participants' recommendations for change that did not have an industry focus ([V.Change](#), [Dep.Change](#), [Curricula](#)). Refrain from coding comments that were not a direct response to a question about changing or improving university experience. For example, do not code comments about how fear of the future ([Future](#)) can impact students' health ([Impacts](#)).

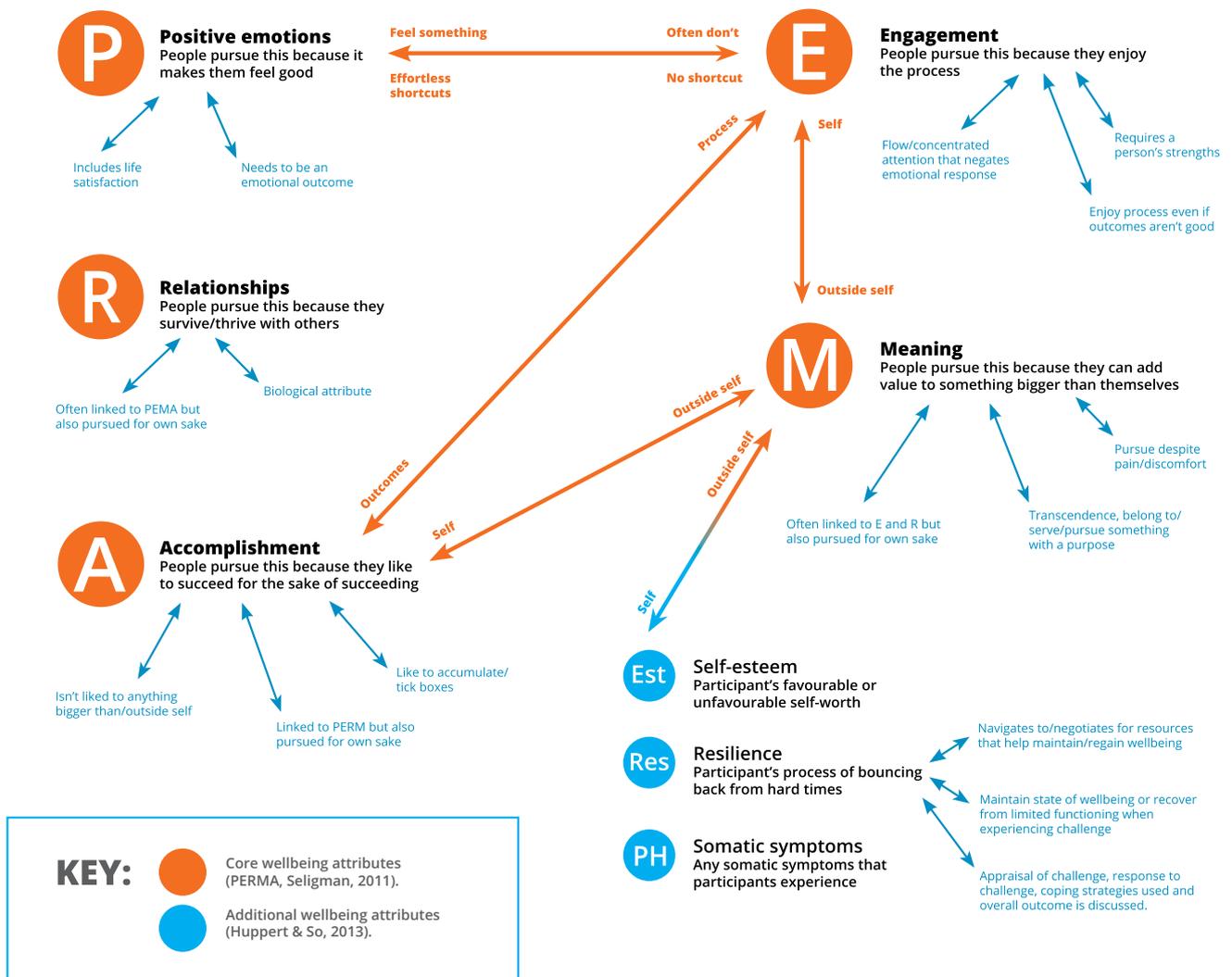
**Example:** "So I think if they found some people to come in and talk more about how you get into the industry and stuff like that, in the earlier stages, that would be helpful."

"...I think it would give real-life examples of people who have faced probably the same struggles and potential pitfalls and wellbeing issues that you would be facing."

## Wellbeing Domains (Frequency Codes to be Compared with the above Narrative Themes)

The following wellbeing domains represent observable features of wellbeing that can be positioned along a continuum that is anchored by two main domain variables. The participants demonstrated wellbeing features can be located on different parts of each continuum at different times—according to various internal or external contexts. [Figure A2](#) below provides a summary of these wellbeing features, including the additional features of wellbeing: Physical health, Self-Esteem, Resilience (Huppert & So, 2013).

**Figure A2**  
A Visualised Summary of all Wellbeing Domains, Including Specified Differences<sup>[1]</sup>



1. References to theory that guided the development of this figure can be found at the end of the document.

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## Theme: EMOTIONS (P, Pe or Ne)

**Brief definition:** Participants' pleasant and unpleasant emotions

**Full definition:** Participants expressed how they felt or discussed experiences where they felt unpleasant or pleasant emotions. These pleasant or unpleasant feelings can be experienced at the same time (Butler & Kern, 2016) and are coded regardless of their "provenance, arousal level, or ambiguity in western cultures" (Diener et al., 2010, p. 145).

**When to use:** Code data that referred to how participants were feeling. Data might include words like joy, contented, satisfied, happy, good, pleasant, cheerful, relaxed, **OR** sad, angry, anxious, depressed, fatigued, stressed, bad, unpleasant, afraid, scared, ashamed, guilty, nervous, upset, irritated, resentful, etc. Code any data that indirectly implied the participant's feelings or their sense of humour here, too. Refrain from coding general references to how good or bad the participants' wellbeing is if the comments relate more to resilience or other wellbeing features (e.g., "my wellbeing takes a hit" in context to how they bounce back from hard times). However, if there is no other context, code these general references to wellbeing here.

### Variables:

- **Pleasant:** Participants indicated the quality or intensity of experiencing pleasant emotions. This variable represents a continuum of pleasant emotion, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of very pleasant emotions and 2) implicit references that do not describe the intensity or quality of pleasant emotions felt.
  1. Participants might have used words like "so" and "very" before they described their pleasant emotion. They might have referred specifically to how they felt "joy", feeling "amazing" or "great" with a strong indication of how that emotion impacted their wellbeing.
  2. Participants referred to how things were "fine" and not stressful at all, or they described their experience as "nice", "fun" and "relaxing" without explicitly describing their ownership or the intensity of these feelings. For example, a participant might have explained how they enjoyed spending time by themselves but there was no further description of why and what pleasant emotions the experience evoked. This also relates to participants' explanation for their recommended changes. Participants might have described a proposed change as "really cool" or "very positive" and their observed expressions clearly indicated pleasant emotion. However, they did not explicitly describe their emotions at the time, or how the change could make them feel.
- **Unpleasant Emotion:** Participants described the consistency and intensity of their unpleasant feelings. This variable represents a continuum of unpleasant emotion, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of very unpleasant emotions and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of unpleasant emotions felt.
  1. Participants might have used words like "very", "deeply", or "always" before they mentioned their unpleasant feelings. Participants might have referred to how this unpleasant emotion inhibited their functioning. They might also have specifically referred to having depression and/or anxiety. This can be a professional diagnosis or self-diagnosis.
  2. Participants might have used words like "worry", "afraid", "frustrated" or "lonely" but did not always describe their ownership of the emotion, nor explicitly state the high intensity or consistency of these emotions. For example, participants might have worried about what others think of their art with limited description of their feelings (the survey participants may have said this when they responded to the first short response question).

**When to not use:** Do not code data where participants **did not** indicate an emotional outcome or feeling something ([Engagement](#)). Do not code data that that referred to another person's emotions (e.g., other students).

**Example:** "I [was] feeling sad and angry every day."  
"...it makes me happy. I feel great"

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**The main difference between emotions and engagement themes:** Participants sought pleasant emotions through effortless shortcuts and always felt something (**Emotions**) but when they experienced or sought **Engagement**, they did not refer to their emotions often, they did not take any easy shortcuts, and they needed to use their strengths to achieve this engagement (Seligman, 2011, [Figure A2](#)).

## **Theme: ENGAGEMENT (E)**

**Brief definition:** Participants' engagement and disengagement

**Full definition:** Participants described the **process** by which they completed a task.

**When to use:** Code data that referred to the positive and negative ways that participants completed tasks. Data will include how participants liked (or disliked) the *process*, **even if the outcomes were not good**. Data might refer to how the participants' concentrated attention negated any emotional or cognitive resources, how they felt like time has stopped, or they had lost self-consciousness—otherwise referred to as flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2014; McDonald, 2008; Seligman, 2011). Data might include words like: “flow”, “intense concentration”, “absorbed”, “focussed”, “excited”, “interested”, “engrossed”, “devoted”, “love learning”, “occupied”, “involved”, **OR** “disengaged”, “bored”, “lost interest” (in what they previously cared about), “restless”, “fidgety”, “slow in thought” (compared to before), “trouble focusing”, “trouble concentrating”, “distracted”.

### **Variables:**

- **Engaged:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of engagement, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of engagement and 2) implicit references that do not describe the intensity or quality of engagement.
  1. Participants might have explicitly referred to their state of flow, how they were interested and enjoyed the process of completing a task, or how enthusiastic they were about learning and doing. They might have referred to how they did not care about the end results or they forgot to eat and sleep, but did not seem to mind because they loved the process of creating. Participants might have demonstrated a high level of energy, effort, attention and involvement in tasks on a regular basis. They might have also come across as busy or occupied, but they viewed this in a positive light and often were able to continue participating in other activities.
  2. Participants might have also made general or indirect references to their process, including a general love, enjoyment or interest in learning and doing. Participants might have talked about how they used music or other tools to “power through” assessment, or how it was hard to create art because they had to use their internal resources (also recognised as strengths) to create. Participants might describe how the classroom dynamics influenced how they learnt, with emphasis on their learning process rather than the relationships themselves. Alternatively, participants might have described how they felt engaged with university but not in an overly positive sense (e.g., they mention setting aside time for other tasks and goals, just so they are not as absorbed in uni).
- **Disengaged:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of disengagement, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of disengagement and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of disengagement.
  1. Participants explicitly described how they were bored, disengaged, frustrated, or “over” the task they were doing because they did not enjoy the process. These participants might have experienced frequent creative blocks or overthinking where they were unable to engage. Alternatively, they might have lacked interest, commitment, or did not have the energy, attention or excitement necessary to be engaged. Participants might have

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indicated how the intensity of this disengagement negatively influenced their academic functioning, creativity or overall wellbeing.

2. Participants did not explicitly refer to how they were disengaged but instead, there was a general or indirect indication that certain challenges prevented them from learning or enjoying the process of completing a task. For example, participants might have had trouble learning how to use the software or managing the speed in which they needed to learn. However, they did not completely disengage from the task (e.g., when participants felt frustrated that they could not learn a certain skill at university, even though they worked around this challenge and eventually found themselves engaged in learning again). Participants might have explained that they were too lazy to go and seek mental health service help, or any professional development workshops.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to another person's engagement (e.g., other students), or data that referred to the positive or negative outcomes of these tasks (**Accomplishment**). Do not code data that indicated how participants were happy with the process—even though the outcomes were not good—because it contributes to something outside of themselves (**Meaning**).

**Example:** "Yeah, it's like being in the zone when you play sport you can just do it effortlessly"

**The main difference between engagement and accomplishment themes:** When participants sought engagement to flourish in life, they were focussed on their experience when they were *in the process* of completing goals. Whereas participants who sought accomplishment are focussed on the *outcomes* and wanted to succeed simply for the sake of succeeding (Seligman, 2011, [Figure A2](#)).

**Example:** "I'm doing really well at university. I've got some awards and stuff (**Accomplishment**). I'm really enjoying it which is the most important thing (**Engagement**)."

## **Theme: RELATIONSHIPS (R)**

**Brief definition:** Participants' pleasant and unpleasant relationships

**Full definition:** Participants mentioned their relationships with others and how they perceived these relationships, or lack of relationships.

**When to use:** Data will often have a link with other themes, but they also include how participants pursued relationships to survive or thrive at university (Seligman, 2011). Code data that referred to participants' positive and negative relationships, or lack of relationships. Code data that referred to the participants' self-described capacity to be loved or how they were kind to others. Also, code data that referred to the participants' number of relationships, number and quality of relationships, received support from others (objective), perceived support from others (subjective), satisfaction with the support they received and when they were given support to others (Butler & Kern, 2016).

Data might include words like "support", "help", "loved", "giving" (to others), "getting along", "maintaining relations", "close", "caring", "respected", "teamwork", **OR** "lonely", "isolated", "withdrawn", "unappreciated", "disrespected", "no support", "misunderstood", "inferior", "bad" (interactions).

### **Variables:**

- **Supportive:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of positive relationships, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of supportive relationships and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of supportive relationships.
  1. Participant had consistently positive relationships that they relied on to influence their wellbeing. They might have used words like "always", "everything", "very", "amazing" and "major" when describing these positive relationships. Participants might have mentioned how these relationships positively influenced the way they functioned in life, or their comments indicated that they relied heavily on the advice of those they spoke with, which impacted their wellbeing. Also, participants might have mentioned how their own

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contribution to the relationship influenced their wellbeing.

2. General or indirect references to relationships that seemed to help participants cope. In this case, there is often no inclusion of descriptive words that indicated how helpful or supportive the relationship was. If descriptive words were used, they included words like “good”, “useful”, “helpful”, “familiar”, “comfortable” or “pretty good”. Data coded here might have referred to the participants hanging out, chill time, or simply talking to their friends, family, teachers or professional supporters—but there is no indication that the participants reached out for deeper support through the relationship, or how helpful the relationship was. Participants might have also discussed how they like to support or make other people happy.
- **Unsupportive:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of negative relationships, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of unsupportive relationships and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of unsupportive relationships.
    1. Explicit mention of relationships that were unsupportive or had a negative impact on the participant. For instance, a teacher’s well-meant comments might have still been received in an overly negative light due to the participant’s troubles with social anxiety or perfectionism. Participants might have referred to social anxiety or how they isolated themselves constantly.
    2. General or indirect comments that referred to relationships that did not help the participant cope. Data might include when participants did not reach out for help, were misunderstood by others, compared themselves to others or did not have relationships at university. Participant might have also referred to times when others did not take their advice, or to how society in general was unsupportive of their art endeavours.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that refers to another person’s relationships (e.g., other students)

**Example:** “...I don’t have a network. I’m like, “Well, why can’t you just listen to me?”

## Theme: MEANING (M)

**Brief definition:** Participants’ high and low meaning

**Full definition:** Participants referenced a sense of belonging or pursuit of something that they believed is bigger than themselves.

**When to use:** Code when participants described a sense of meaning. This data can often be linked to relationships and emotions (Seligman, 2011). Code data that referred to participant’s sense of transcendence, when they pursued things despite pain or discomfort because they believed it added value to something else, or they believed that they belonged to or serviced something larger than themselves. Data might include words like “purpose”, “direction” (in life), “worth”, “value”, “life matters”, “belief”, “feel useful”, “clear goal” (in life), “inspired”, “gratitude”, “spirituality”, **OR** “meaningless”, “waste”, “trivial”, “unimportant”, “useless”, “lack of direction” (in life), “unbelief”.

### Variables:

- **Meaning:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of meaning, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of meaning and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of meaning.
  1. Participants explicitly described how their life and/or the activities they did were important, valuable and worthwhile. They specifically mentioned how they had a clear sense of direction in life, or they were driven by a purpose to contribute to or add value to something greater than themselves. There was some indication that they played a useful role in the world around them and that they would continue to contribute via this

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role despite any challenges they faced. Participants might have described how they lived according to their beliefs.

2. Include general references to ideas or tasks that participants completed to impact other people, referenced beliefs or religious practice, or comments about how art influences others and how they will persevere despite what other people think. For example, a participant might have generally referred to their belief in art and how important it is, or the type of ideas they wanted to communicate to their audience. Participants might have also referred to how their role as a university student gave them structure, direction and a sense of purpose in life.
- **Low Meaning:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of low meaning, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of low meaning and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of low meaning.
    1. Participants explicitly indicated that they viewed their lives and/or the activities they did in life as trivial and unimportant. They made specific and direct comments about having no purpose or meaning and feeling worthless. Participants might have referred to how they felt lost, or that they had no direction because what they were doing no longer gave them a sense of purpose. They might have felt like they did not play a useful role in the world around them and often mentioned having depression and unpleasant emotions when they responded to the other interview or survey questions.
    2. General statements that indicated that the participant found their time in the degree (or as an artist) a worthless and pointless contribution and they were wasting their time. Participants might have indicated implicit concern that their art will become less influential for certain reasons, or they felt lost or did not know what they were doing.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to participants seeking to accomplish something just for the sake of accomplishing it (**Accomplishment**), or because they just liked the process of completing it (**Engagement**). Do not code data that referred to another person's meaning (e.g., other students). Do not code participant comments that referred explicitly to participants' feelings of self-worth (**Self-esteem**).

**Example:** "Well, I can add some value to this and help another student or someone in the future."  
"I worry that what I produce is not meaningful or useful to the broader community."

### **The main difference between the meaning theme vs. the engagement and accomplishment themes:**

When participants sought meaning to flourish in their lives, they were focussed on contributing to something larger than themselves (e.g., other people, religious figure, etc.) whereas when they sought engagement and accomplishment, they were more focussed on themselves (Seligman, 2011, [Figure A2](#)).

### **Theme: ACCOMPLISHMENT (A)**

**Brief definition:** Participants' high and low accomplishment

**Full definition:** Participants described the **results** of their completed tasks.

**When to use:** Code any positive or negative mention of participants outcomes from a completed task. This data can often be linked to emotions, engagement and meaning (Seligman, 2011) and might include how participants liked to 'tick boxes' or achieve simply for the sake of achieving. Data might refer to how participants liked to accumulate things (Seligman, 2011), believed in their ability to achieve goals (Butler & Kern, 2016), indicated their competence or capabilities, liked to aspire to the highest level of success, enjoyed making plans, or focussed on and progressed towards their goals (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011).

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Data might include words like “accomplish”, “achieve”, “competence”, “mastery”, “efficacy”, “progress”, “goal”, “responsibilities”, “stick to” (aims), “success”, “capable”, “proud” (of achievements), “persistence”, **OR** “failure”, “no achievements”, “can’t deal” (with problems), “can’t focus” (or set mind to things), “disappointed” (in outcomes).

### Variables:

- **Accomplishment:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of accomplishment, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of accomplishment and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of accomplishment.
  1. Participants explicitly referred to feeling successful, competent and capable in achieving their goals, feeling proud of what they had achieved or feeling like they were making progress with their goals. These participants might have mentioned a specific creative or academic achievement. They might have indicated confidence in sticking to or managing their goals and were given sufficient opportunity to show their capabilities. They referred to how they enjoyed completing tasks and handling responsibilities. Overall, these participants indicated how their accomplishment positively impacted their wellbeing.
  2. Participants made indirect statements that generally indicated their focus on goals and a sense of direction towards finishing tasks and achieving (e.g., focus on developing competency with skills) because they found it satisfying or it helped them with their daily functioning. However, these participants might have felt that gathering the skills they needed was difficult and they were thus limited in how quickly/, or how much they progressed (e.g., they had to train themselves to be employable or relevant in a professional setting).
- **Low Accomplishment:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of low accomplishment, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of low accomplishment and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of low accomplishment.
  1. Participants explicitly described reasons why they did not feel competent or capable enough to maintain, progress with or achieve their goals. This may have resulted in negative views on their progress in the degree or caused them to doubt the degree itself. They might have referred to moments when they failed to reach their goals or expressed negative emotion regarding their failure in academic, workforce or artistic environments. Participants might have been very specific in describing disappointment about their achievement in their degree or life. *Alternatively*, participants might have achieved something, but they felt very negative about the achievement because they did not reach the level of accomplishment that they wanted, and they did not feel like they were making progress. *This can be linked with self-orientated perfectionism (Curran & Hill, 2019)*, where participants might have felt motivated to strive for perfection and avoid failure, but their self-worth was tied into their achievement and they were unable to have lasting satisfaction from their achievement. These participants might have referred to their low achievement as negatively influencing their wellbeing.
  2. Participants described a general frustration regarding lack of skills, guidance or incompetence that kept them from completing their goals. Comments from these participants might have indirectly related to a lack of self-efficacy, goal setting and time management. Also, participants might have referred to how they had not received access to resources to achieve, or they haven’t received much guidance or information (for various reasons) but they did not directly state that this has inhibited their ability to succeed in the areas they wanted to.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to another person’s accomplishment (e.g., other students). Refrain from coding data that referred to the positive or negative **processes** that participants used to complete tasks (**Engagement**), or when participants sought to complete a task because they believed it contributed to something bigger than themselves (**Meaning**).

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**Example:** “I’m doing really well at university. I’ve got some awards and stuff”  
“I failed a whole year. Two whole semesters. That was bad, hey.”

## **Theme: PHYSICAL HEALTH (H)**

**Brief definition:** Participants’ good and poor physical health

**Full definition:** Participants discussed somatic symptoms that indicated their physical health

**When to use:** Code data that related to the participants’ body and were distinct from their mind or emotions. Data can refer to participants’ healthy or unhealthy diet and exercise, sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little, being tired or full of energy, being short of breath, physically tense or relaxed, dizzy, nauseous, or injured.

### **Variables:**

- **Physical Health:** Participants specifically referred to having a healthy or healthier diet, sleep routine, exercise or health in general. Participants might have referred to how they were trying to keep a healthy diet and exercise as a stress reliever. They might have referred to how they engaged in sport regularly and tried to keep a good sleep routine.
- **Poor Physical Health:** Participants specifically referred to having an unhealthy diet, sleep routine, exercise or health in general. Participants might have referred to how they drank too much alcohol, ate too much or could not sleep. Participants might have mentioned that they had an injury, headaches, illness or chronic illness. They might have expressed their need to exercise and reasons why they could not, or they might have explained how they forget to eat or sleep because they were so immersed in their work.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to another person’s physical health (e.g., other students)

**Example:** “I can eat healthier food than if I bought it from the cafes”  
“I might binge-eat and drink as much coffee as I can get my hands on.”

## **Theme: RESILIENCE (Res)**

**Brief definition:** Participants’ described resilience to challenges

**Full definition:** Participants described or demonstrated how they bounced back from hard times

**When to use:** Code data that referred to participants’ resilience as a process where they encountered a challenge and responded to the challenge. Data might include how the participants appraised hard times, their demonstration of psychological factors that indicated resilience, their application of coping strategies to respond to challenges, their ability to withstand or resist disempowering factors, and how this process influenced their daily functioning. Code data that includes words like “bounced back”, “adapt”, “cope”, “resistance”, “thriving”, “making it through” **OR** “floundering”, “taking a long time” (to adapt) **OR** “can’t cope”, “take things hard”.

### **Variables:**

- **Resilience:** This variable represents a continuum of participants’ resilience, including descriptions of 1) how the participant bounced back from challenges, 2) how the participant was able to remain positive and persevere over a long period of time to achieve their goals, 3) the types of adaptive coping strategies they used to cope with hard times, and 4) how participants were able to recover from challenges after some time.

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1. Participant explicitly mentions a) the challenge, b) how they positively responded to the challenge, and c) the positive outcome. Data coded here specifies how the participant's daily functioning was not drastically altered for long when they first encountered the challenge. **Alternatively**, the participant provided an implicit description of their resilience process. Here, data might not mention the above process (the a), b) and c) criteria), but only two of the requirements. For example, a participant might have described a positive response to a challenge, but the outcome is not defined. Or a participant might have demonstrated a positive appraisal of how they need to cope with challenges in the future, but there is no specific challenge mentioned. Data coded here includes participants' subjective description of their resilience when they faced hard times, even though they may not necessarily identify their behaviour as being resilient.
  2. Participants were able to remain positive and persevere over a long period of time (over several months). This ability is also referred to as grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Participants who demonstrated grit remained positive, passionate, enthusiastic and determined to achieve their long-term goals despite any failure, hardship or plateaus in their progress. For example, participants might have explained how they did not worry or care about what other people think of their art because it is their way of self-expressing.
  3. Participants only described the way they coped with hard times and their methods were active and adaptive. For example, a survey participant might have responded to the question "how do you cope with hard times?" by saying that they were on antidepressants, or they spoke to a counsellor, or exercised, etc. Please note, coding strategies into adaptive or maladaptive categories requires careful consideration, given there is limited consensus about the dimension of these categories (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003).
  4. Participants recovered slowly after negatively responding to a challenge. The participant's daily functioning might have been interrupted but after some time they were able to regain their functioning and feel positive about continuing with their academic or creative commitments. For example, a participant may have been unable to leave the bed after a breakup but they recovered in a week.
- **Vulnerability:** This variable has been labelled as 'vulnerability' to help identify participants' low resilience. However, resilience and vulnerability are not antonyms of each other because they coexist in everyone (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). This variable represents a continuum of participants' vulnerability, including descriptions of 1) how the participants did not bounce back from challenges, 2) how the participants experienced limited functioning and negative emotions as they withstood continued challenges, and 3) the types of maladaptive coping strategies that the participants used to cope with hard times.
    1. Participants responded to questions about how they coped with hard times in a negative way (e.g., they said they did not cope, they did not seek help, they said there was no way to fix their problems, they coped badly or they could do better). Participants may not have indicated the extent of their vulnerability or how frequently this impaired their daily functioning. Participants might have explained how they felt exposed and took criticism of their art personally, thus affecting their wellbeing. Participants explicitly mentioned how it took them a long time to bounce back from certain challenges, or they referred to how easily or how frequently they broke down and had severely disrupted daily functioning. Participants often mentioned that they had depression or experienced unpleasant emotions when they responded to the other interview or survey questions.
    2. Participants survived continued challenges by deviating from typical (active) coping strategies. These participants might have described what they viewed as a positive outcome, or success in their own terms (Bottrell, 2007) despite the negative impact on

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their daily functioning. For example, participants might have received good grades despite experiencing multiple breakdowns to get work done, or they might have just survived another stage in their degree, or just been able to submit their work (even if it was late). The participants might have also viewed the way they survived as a form of resilience. However, even though their survival strategies indicated a type of grit that helped them resist challenging circumstances, it negatively impacted their functioning. Data might include a) when participants did not have a positive outlook on how they persevered through ongoing challenges, but simply viewed it as survival, b) when participants chose to ignore, suppress, or simply work through any emotional or mental challenges that they experienced because they had to meet a deadline, c) when participants chose not to commit suicide because they felt responsible for their family and friends, or d) when participants described a cycle where they abused food or substances to get through a stressful period of their degree.

3. Participants only described the way they coped with hard times by mentioning methods that were maladaptive rather than active and adaptive. For example, a survey participant might have responded to the question “how do you cope with hard times?” by saying that they smoked weed, drank a lot of alcohol and distracted themselves by watching lots of YouTube clips. Please note: coding strategies into maladaptive or adaptive categories requires careful consideration, given there is limited consensus about the dimension of these categories (Skinner et al., 2003).

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to another persons’ resilience (e.g., other students).

**Examples coded in Resilience variable:**

“And then, it’s not, it’s not too bad. But, like, yeah, for like half an hour I was just like, “Oh, no, I shouldn’t be here”, but then I don’t know, I sort of like stepped back and was like “Oh, she was telling me that for a reason, and now I’ve got to sort of figure out what’s a different purpose of me being at art school? Like what do I want to achieve with my art, why do I do it?” It just made me, um, sort of rethink everything, which is I think ultimately it was really good

“Not often do I feel worried about what others think of my art, however it has taken me years to now get to this point. I have always stuck to what I love doing and listened to the advice and criticisms of my peers and lecturers even when it made me feel self-conscious at the time. Now that I’ve pushed through some personal barriers, it’s easier to take on criticism and be grounded knowing what I’m doing is meaningful.”

“Often if I’m having a really hard time, I will sleep a lot and spend a lot of time online/internet too and lose interest in university. But I almost always regain momentum quite quickly.”

“I have a rest day on the weekend where I see my boyfriend, that generally take the stress out.”

**Examples coded in Vulnerability variable:**

“I don’t think I cope with uni problems too well, to be honest”

“I kind [of] don’t [cope]. it snowballs, getting worse. Sometimes I don’t face it, don’t go to class etc. Just avoid it. Then I get an extension but get it done the second time round but get it done the second time round.”

“Look, it’s just having the inner strength to go on despite—This year I’ve been suicidal. Resilience to me is being able to go on when you have no idea what reserves you’re actually drawing on because on paper you really should not keep on living whatever life you’ve got. You know. Resilience, to me, it’s surviving despite not having a life worth living. That’s the bare bones of it.”

“I guess [at] the end of my last trimester, my anxiety got pretty bad. But I could still kind of manage to get everything done. Despite constantly freaking out and being stressed. I don’t know if you’d call it thriving, but it takes a lot of effort not to just give up when you feel overwhelmed. I know a lot of other people just dropped out at the end of that trimester because they couldn’t handle it.”

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“I tend to procrastinate by browsing social media and chatting with friends. I might miss the deadline even further by doing so but my anxiety is kind of relieved.”

“Although a bad habit I have when I’m frustrated or sad is stress eating!”

## **Theme: SELF-ESTEEM (Est)**

**Brief definition:** Participants’ described favourable or unfavourable self-worth

**Full definition:** Participants mentioned their favourable or unfavourable self-competence and self-worth (Hewittt, 2005).

**When to use:** Code data that indicated how participants viewed themselves or their artwork in a positive or negative way. Data can be related to participants’ views on if they are deserving of respect and merit or if their aspirations and achievements had meaning.

### **Variables:**

- **Self-esteem:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of their self-esteem, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of participants’ self-esteem and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of participant’s self-esteem.
  1. Participants demonstrated both feeling proud or pleased with themselves and what they did with their art/degrees. Data coded here indicates that the participants liked themselves and found themselves worthy. Participants did not show signs of feeling like they had failed after experiencing setbacks and they were able to persist because they were more confident in their ability to succeed.
  2. Participants implicitly indicated a sense of self-worth and confidence in themselves and their capabilities, but there was no indication of the extent or duration that they felt this way.
- **Low self-esteem:** This variable represents a continuum of participant descriptions of their low self-esteem, anchored by 1) explicit descriptions of participants’ low self-esteem and 2) implicit references that did not describe the intensity or quality of participant’s low self-esteem.
  1. Participants referred to themselves and their work in a doubtful manner or expressed feelings of shame or humiliation. They might have been self-blaming, they might have described their lack of skills, or they might have explained how their failures indicated that they were not worthy of being in the art industry or in their degree.
  2. Participants referred to how they doubted themselves or doubted that their work was good enough. However, there is no explicit indication of the extent or duration that they felt this way.

**When to not use:** Do not code data that referred to another persons’ self-esteem (e.g., other students). Do not code data that referred to how participants contributed to or wanted to contribute to things that are larger than themselves (code in [Meaning](#)).

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**Example:**

"It wasn't until this year that I feel confident again to go back to university and realise that I was so much more than my designs and the work that I produced. It took me and is still taking me a long time to accept that design is just my career choice and a passion. It doesn't define me as a person."

"...Let's just do a little bit of your assignment while your brain isn't aching and telling you how much you fucking suck. Because you've got creating to do."

"I can't seem to get anything right. that my ideas are unoriginal because I'm too afraid to use my original ideas in fear they are stupid."

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## Initial analysis of transcript for:

Research question: **How can visual art students' wellbeing be improved and sustained during their higher education?**

Research objectives: **Describe** current mental health, wellbeing and resilience of students; and **Explore** ways to improve and sustain students' wellbeing through their higher education.

**Interview date:**

**Chronological order:** /29

**Is data saturation achieved yet?**

**Do you notice a change in your interview style?**

**Summary of rapport with participant:**

**Have you *not* asked questions written on the list?**

**Have you asked questions that are not on the list?**

**What information is contradictory or confusing?**

**Suggested codes:**

1.

**Suggested themes (no more than 5):**

1.



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## Before you read my summary of your interview, here's some information

*On the next page you will find my 1-2-page description of who you are and what you said during our interview in 2018. This summary serves as a 'check point' where you can clarify and/or confirm that I am representing your perspective accurately.*

### **Please note:**

1. Some of this summary might be used in future publications, so I have made sure there is no information included that can be used to identify you (you will notice that I use an *alias*, instead of your real name). If you find any information that people could read and use to easily identify you, please let me know.
2. Describing a ~1hr conversation in 2-3 paragraphs can be quite a challenge! Hence, I haven't covered everything we discussed during your interview but have aimed to summarise the points that I think align best with the objectives of my research. These objectives are to:
  - a. Describe the mental health, wellbeing and resilience of art students
  - b. Explore ways to improve and sustain students' wellbeing through their education
3. Any additional information (including quotes) from your interview that *haven't* been summarised here might be included in future publications so please keep this in mind. I will make sure to protect your identity with any information I publish.
4. I have mostly used present tense (although our interview was last year) and endeavoured to use some of your words and phrases that you mentioned during the interview.

### *When reading my summary (on the next page)*

Don't worry too much about editing the narrative (even if there are grammatical errors etc.). The priority here is the *meaning* of your story. You might find it helpful to answer these questions:

*Does my interpretation of the interview represent your views?* Yes/No (If you think the interpretation could be improved, how so?)

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*Is there anything else you would like me to add? Yes/No*

## **Summary**

*3-5 key words that reflect our past conversation*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

*A narrative description of who you are and what you said*

(1-2 page narrative description added here)