MONASH University

MONASH EDUCATION

EDUCATION INTO THE 2030s

THE BIG EDUCATION CHALLENGES OF OUR TIMES

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MONASH EDUCATION

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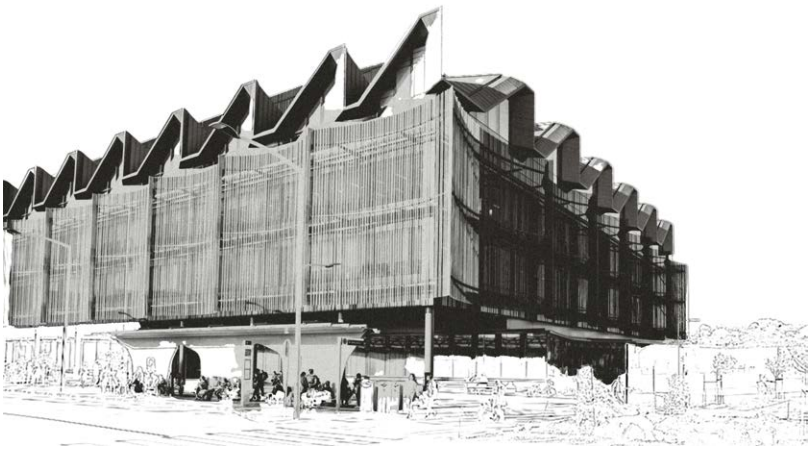
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction



This publication presents 10 essays written by a diverse cross-section of educational scholars from the Faculty of Education at Monash University. These essays identify and explore the educational trends and technologies we will see over the next decade, along with suggestions for changing the lens through which we look at these challenges.

Last year we introduced The Big Education Challenges of our Times with essays from some of our leading academics. That started important conversations about how we should be shifting our research and practice into the 2030s. This year, we are centring the voices of our emerging experts who, early in their career, are demonstrating noticeable impact in the field.

These pieces cover a wide range of topics across education. We begin with an examination of the impact of students not in the classroom (Patrick) to the challenges of problematic online behaviour making its way into the classroom (Westcott). The climate crisis is a current and ongoing issue showing up in schools; students are stressed by what climate change means for their futures. Marangio considers the need to imbed education on climate change into our teaching, and discusses how psychology education may be well positioned to meet this challenge. Premier highlights how globalisation is leading to more diverse learners in our classrooms, where we must consider how we teach English as an Additional Language (EAL) students.

Now, what can we do about the problems we have identified? The essays that follow explore how we support educators tackling these challenges: the need to focus on evidence-based practices to address educational excellence and equity (Gleeson & Rickson); how varied teacher supports should be responsive to teacher's needs (Bloomfield & Fox); and how high-quality training, including virtual reality (Blannin), can make a difference for all educators.

We do not have to be pessimistic about the future of education. Wrapping up this publication is a trio of essays about the strengths we can look forward to. Lea & Reupert explain how we can promote kindness to support young people's wellbeing. Devenish and colleagues then demonstrate that, by building self-determination, we can encourage better outcomes for young people with disability. Finally, we end this collection with a call to action for us all to take neurodiversity seriously (Rabba et al.), with explicit steps we can take to support neurodivergent staff and students.

These authors pose difficult questions that interrupt our current viewpoints on education and challenge us to consider how engage with these discussions into the future. We hope that this is just a starting point in provoking conversations about the big education challenges of our times.

Brad Bloomfield

Empty classrooms: A growing concern in Australian schools

PAMELA PATRICK

From the lingering impacts of COVID-19 to teacher attrition and funding shortfalls, Australian schools continue to experience a myriad of challenges that adversely impact the education of Australian children and young people. In 2023, the OECD's education policy outlook for Australia highlighted growing concerns in the areas of teacher shortages, inequality and bullying in Australian schools (OECD, 2023a). Specifically, bullying was reportedly three times the global average. Other data have highlighted increasing rates of school disengagement and non-attendance, with attendance rates for students in years 1–10 dropping from 91.4% in 2019 to 86.5% in 2022 (ACARA, 2024).

COMPLEXITIES OF SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

Schools play a pivotal role in the development of social, emotional and life skills of young people, as well as their academic development; therefore, school non-attendance can have potentially lifelong effects. Rightfully, increasing rates of school non-attendance have captured the interest of federal and state governments, resulting in a 2023 senate inquiry that outlined 14 specific recommendations to address 'the national trend of school refusal and related matters' (Parliament of Australia, 2023). These include undertaking research to obtain a nationally agreed upon definition of school refusal, exploring the drivers and prevalence of school refusal, and opportunities for earlier identification of students at risk of school withdrawal.

Many factors can contribute to school non-attendance. Much of the research on school non-attendance to date was collected prior to the pandemic or is quantitative rather than qualitative. To address this research gap, a team of Monash researchers interviewed parents and teens from the same household to delve deeper into the challenges of having a teen who is experiencing school non-attendance concerns. The top three concerns raised by teens were bullying, feeling like their absence did not make a difference to anyone, and finding their subjects irrelevant and inapplicable (unpublished data).

When teens were asked why they were attending school less often post-lockdowns, several explained the lockdowns were proof that home-based learning was possible over a prolonged period, making them question whether there was a need to physically attend school. It is worth noting that these sentiments were voiced by students who were already facing school challenges or lacked a sense of belonging among their peers or to their school communities.

Parents described their feelings of frustration and hopelessness, noting that even if they were successful in coaxing their teen to attend school, it was often short-lived. Parents also commented that when their teen perceived that their teachers did not care, it amplified disenchantment about school. Parent–school relationships were also touched on, with parents stating that efforts by the school to re-engage a young person often seemed tokenistic and, perhaps unintentionally, seemed to shift the responsibility of school engagement to parents. What has made it more challenging for parents is trying to justify to their children that physical attendance at school is important following a prolonged period of home-based learning.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

Like their students, teachers are also struggling to stay connected with schools. Much has been written about the burnout, poor job satisfaction and high turnover rate of Australian teachers. There are a range of factors that contribute to growing teacher attrition rates, such as disruptive classrooms. A recent report revealed that the disciplinary climate in Australian classrooms is among the worst in OECD countries (OECD, 2023b). As well as classroom behaviour, there are many new and evolving issues, such as artificial intelligence, expanding administrative requirements, parental demands, and increasing use of vapes, drugs and alcohol by students. These all combine to make teaching a more complex and demanding profession than ever before.

Most teachers will tell you that the main reason they went into the profession was to fulfil their desire to make a difference for children and young people. However, when much of a teacher's day is filled with mundane and onerous administrative duties, or conflict with students or parents, it is little wonder that teachers feel a lack of passion for, and fulfilment from, their job.

International research suggests that top performing school systems often are found in countries that have high levels of respect and appreciation for teachers. Yet, an Australian study revealed only 29% of teachers felt that the Australian public appreciated them (Heffernan et al., 2019). This was despite findings from an Australian public survey indicating 82% of people respected teachers and 93% trusted teachers. Evidently, perceptions held by the Australian public about teachers are not translating to how teachers themselves feel about and perceive their roles, warranting further emphasis on teacher wellbeing. Other studies have found that one-off activities that focus solely on the individual are, at best, band-aid fixes and a multi-pronged, systemic approach is needed to address the increasing role complexity of teachers (Hine et al., 2022).

With dwindling student attendance rates and surging teacher attrition, it is evident that schooling in Australia is currently not functioning well. However, these challenges also provide a potential catalyst for meaningful change. What can schools do differently to become more welcoming, supportive, and sustaining places where students and teachers can flourish together?

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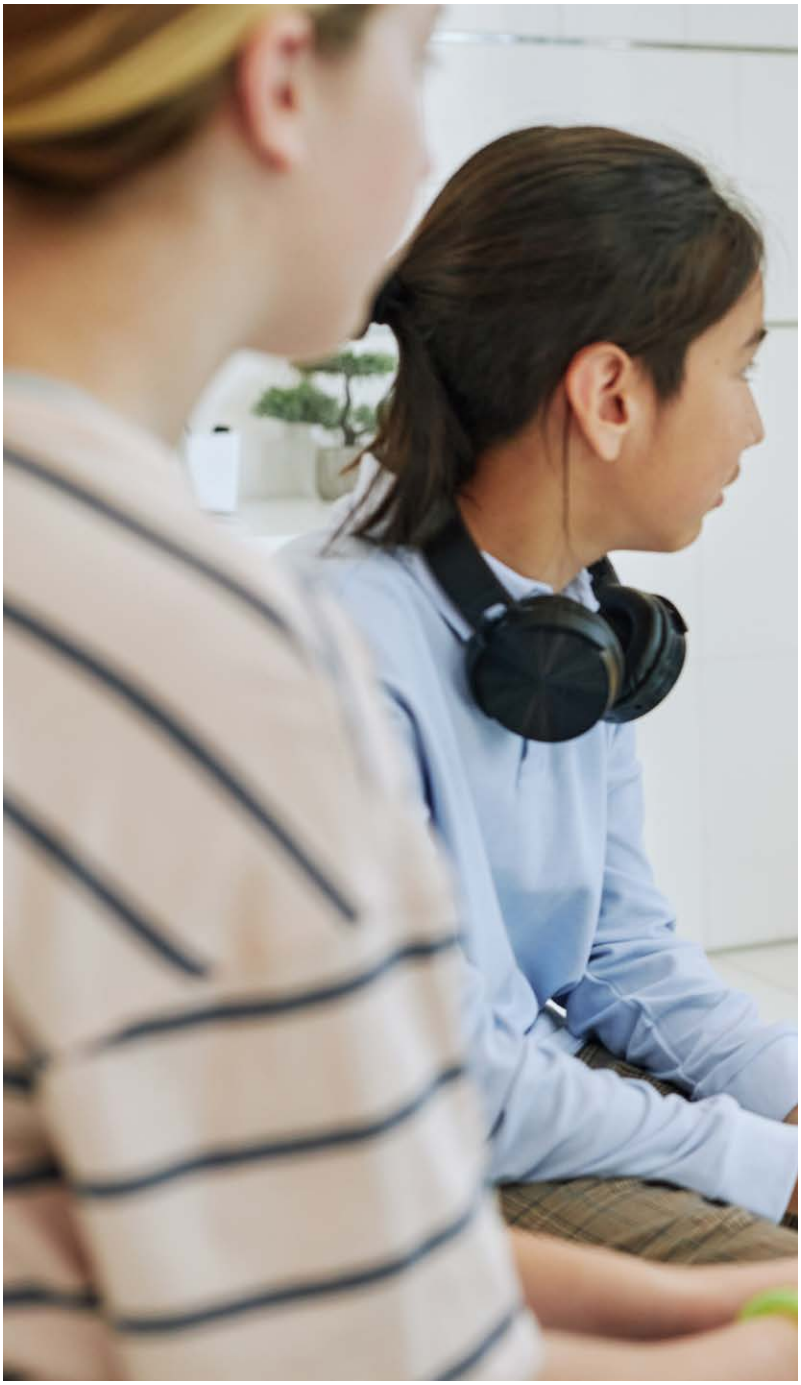
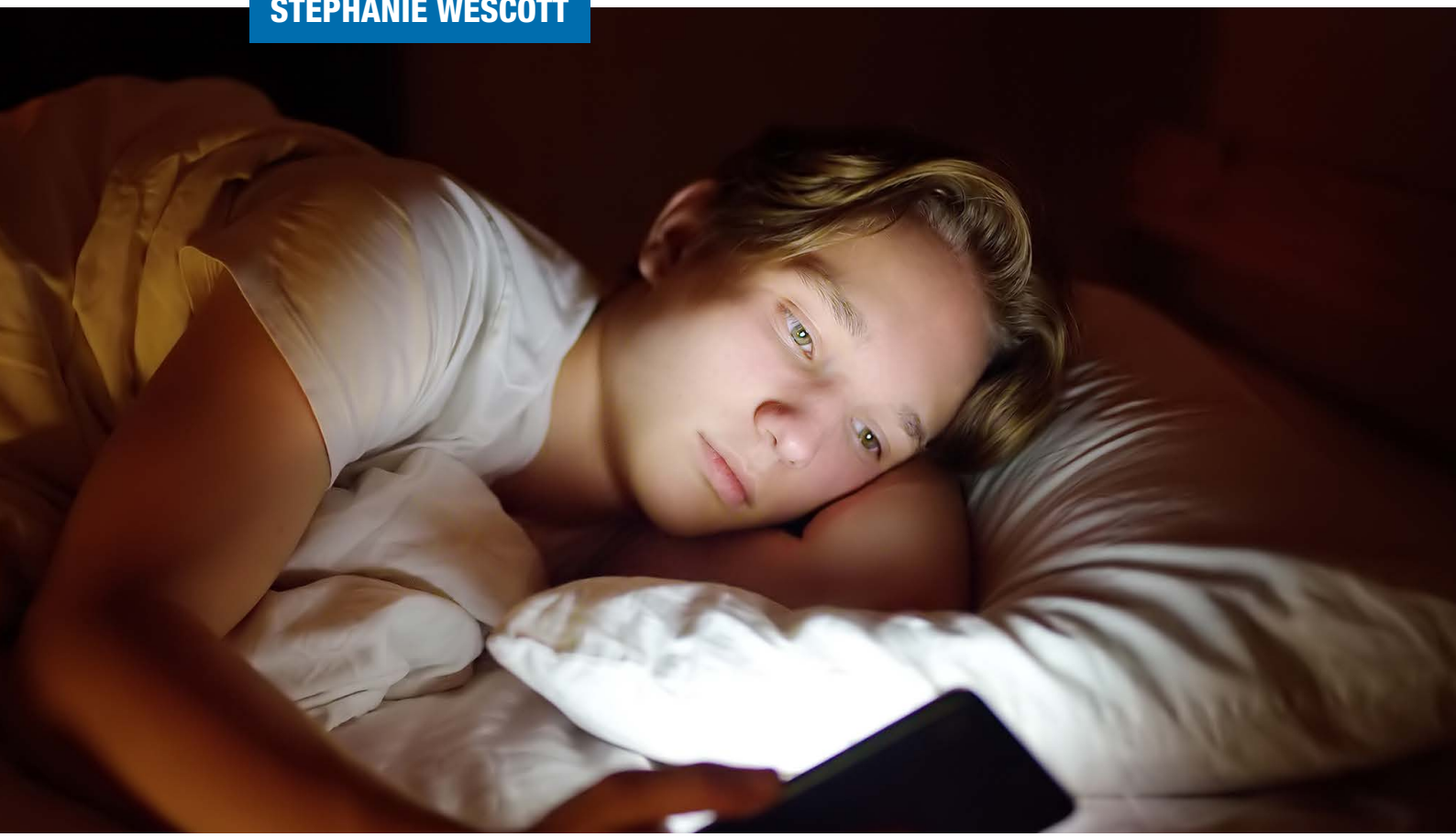


Post-truth politics and manosphere extremists in Australian schools

STEPHANIE WESCOTT



Figures of the 'manosphere' – a loose group of online figures who espouse anti-feminist and misogynist ideas and promote regressive ideas of masculinity – have risen in popularity in recent years. Given the currency these figures have among some young people, how can teachers and schools respond to the influence of dangerous online personalities? How do other social challenges, such as the deliberate spread of disinformation online and appeals to emotion over facts (or other symptoms of 'post-truth'), complicate interventions and approaches to countering extremist ideologies?

THE INFLUENCE OF ANDREW TATE

In June 2023, news broke that Andrew Tate, a popular online figure who generates extreme misogynist content, was to face trial in Romania on charges including human trafficking, rape and forming a criminal gang. While my colleague, Steven Roberts, and I had been advocating for broader acknowledgement of Tate's harmful presence in Australian schools prior to this news (Wescott & Roberts, 2023), we remained sceptical that criminal proceedings were going to loosen the hold his ideology has over some boys and young men (Halliday, 2023).

Our research with 30 women teachers in schools across Australia found that not only is Tate shaping how boys view and treat women, but that he has also enculturated followers into conspiratorial thinking. This has enabled him to claim that the charges were part of a broader conspiracy executed by global 'elites' (Wescott et al., 2024).

Other views held by boys and reported by their teachers represent skewed understandings of gender-based power dynamics: some boys now believe that women are an oppressive force against them, that the gender wage gap doesn't exist, and, of course, that the charges brought against Tate in the Romanian legal system are fake (Wescott et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024).

These findings suggest two intersecting issues: the rise of manosphere figures and their influence on boys and young men; and post-truth conditions that validate the rejection of proven facts.

THE MANOSPHERE IN POST-TRUTH TIMES

In 2020, a United Nations Security Council Report expressed concern about 'scientifically baseless conspiracy theories and disinformation flourish[ing] and spread[ing] rapidly across the internet', as well as growing polarisation and the use of conspiracy theories to 'radicalise, recruit, and inspire plots and attacks' (UN Security Council, 2020, p. 2).

Recent research explores the implications of post-truth politics for schools and for education broadly (Peters et al., 2018), and for teaching specific subjects, such as reading (Carillo, 2018) or science (Valladares, 2022). However, the crossover between the post-truth promulgation of disinformation and the recruitment of young people in Australian schools to radical ideologies such as those touted by Tate requires ongoing attention.

For example, on his website Tate advertises an 'advanced financial education platform' called The Real World, which he claims will 'disrupt the modern education system forever', and enable users to 'escape The Matrix' (mainstream society). The Real World promises a path to wealth creation, but has been revealed to be an exploitative digital grooming site, likened to a pyramid scheme, that recruits followers to produce online content for Tate (Hume, 2024).

While not all boys who follow Tate will end up recruited to this scheme, he creates a dangerous pathway that may lead boys to explore other conspiratorial, post-truth paradigms, dismissive of teachers, schools and other institutions as valid sources of knowledge.

Belief in conspiracy theories have serious implications for both young people and school climates; we know in broader society that they lead to distrust and polarisation (van den Bos, 2023). In exploiting some real concerns among boys and young men, such as economic opportunity and loneliness (Rich & Bujalka, 2023), Tate's content becomes a gateway to other forms of denialism, bigotry and conspiratorial thinking that must be addressed.

WAYS FORWARD

There are multiple opportunities in the Australian Curriculum and to address the influence of manosphere extremists. Critical Thinking has been a long-standing General Capability in the curriculum, and the new Australian Curriculum 9.0 has revised the ICT Capability, which is now Digital Literacy (although the focus of this capability is on safety, privacy and identity, and wellbeing rather than identifying and countering malicious influence). Critical Literacy and Critical Data Literacy have significant roles to play, and there are multiple learning areas where this kind of education can take place. The Respectful Relationships curriculum presents an ideal opportunity to counter harmful ideas and messaging.

Finally, while there are several short-term or day programs and guest speakers available to schools to counter some of the harmful influences of Tate and others, what we really need is long-term, critical, and transformational approaches embedded within both curricula and school cultures.

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Elevating psychology education to embed climate education

KAREN MARANGIO

The world is grappling with a myriad of issues that deeply concern young people. One that troubles many 15- to 25-year-olds is the urgent matter of climate change. International and Australian surveys (Hickman et al., 2021; Fava et al., 2023) emphasise the depth of their concerns over the inadequacies in our responses to climate change and the far-reaching consequences of climate change now and into the future.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Concerns about climate change are escalating and impacting youth today (Teo et al., 2024). Young people are not only worried about harm to the natural environment, but are frustrated by the lack of action from government, industry and business. They are uneasy due to the constant news cycle and regular extreme weather events, feel guilt about not taking enough individual action, and worry about the future of the planet and what this means for their future (Fava et al., 2023). Engaging in actions to mitigate climate change can support their mental health and wellbeing by promoting a sense of purpose and social connection.

The United Nations' *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) called for climate change education to drive the social transformation necessary to address climate change and foster more just, equitable and sustainable ways of living. An education that fosters climate literacy will take multifaceted, multidisciplinary, interconnected approaches – ones that span whole-school programs and individual subjects – and offer positive change and hope (Reid, 2019). Such innovation will go beyond learning about climate science and will focus on climate change-related knowledge, attitudes, values, practices and resources that enable learners to take meaningful actions towards building more resilient, inclusive and sustainable societies.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) has called for an investigation into how the discipline of psychology understands and can address climate change. This urgent call is extended to psychology education.

There is a strong argument for engaging undergraduate psychology students with big social challenges, 'otherwise we are doing our students and society a disservice' (Pearson et al., 2024, p.4). The same argument can be applied to psychology taught in schools.

PSYCHOLOGY EDUCATION AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Integrating climate change education into psychology education offers a way for young people to understand the psychological (cognitive, affective, social, cultural and behavioural) dimensions of climate-related issues, make more informed decisions and take mitigating actions, individually and collectively. Such integration supports the development of students' psychological literacy, which is generally understood as 'the general capacity to adaptively and intentionally apply psychology to meet personal, professional and societal needs' (Cranney et al., 2012, p.3).

Psychology is a popular school subject in places where it is taught around the world, although typically limited to senior secondary years. In Australia, psychology is taught in all states except in New South Wales. In Victoria, one in three students study Year 12 VCE Psychology. Therefore, embedding climate change education in psychology education has the potential to develop climate literacy among a large cohort of learners (Reid & Marangio, 2023).

Currently, climate change is not explicitly acknowledged in any senior secondary psychology curriculum policy in Australia (Marangio & Reid, 2023). It is not communicated as a human-induced issue that poses severe threats to planetary health and wellbeing and to our ways of life, nor is it communicated as a pressing issue of concern to young people.

It is one thing to make an urgent call for curriculum change, but it is very difficult to create such change. Ongoing debates about what to include in the curriculum extend to what must be omitted to make room for a new topic. The result is a tendency to stick with a traditional curriculum or overcrowd it. Since curriculum policy change can take years, teachers should be encouraged to find ways to leverage current affordances.

There are likely to be teachers who are introducing climate-related issues in their psychology classes. Most psychology topics lend themselves to integrating the psychological dimensions of climate-related issues.

Such topics include:

- emotion and motivation, hope and resilience;
- mental health and wellbeing, coping and self-regulation;
- social and community psychology, inclusion and belonging, cultural responsiveness and Indigenous psychology;
- attitudes, beliefs and values, advertising and persuasion, navigating mis-, dis- and mal-information in the media; and
- environmental psychology, psychology of volunteering, psychology-related careers.

Making shifts to include climate education within psychology education will take well-planned, purposeful and strategic responses. Teachers are open to innovative approaches, but will require time, space and dialogue for curriculum-making. They will need to be given opportunities to share their insights with other teachers and engage in professional learning which is often difficult to access (Marangio & Heyting, 2022; 2023). Such opportunities will position teachers as experts to navigate meaningful curriculum change across policy-making bodies, initial teacher education, professional associations, teacher networks, schools and, most importantly, classrooms, in order to position their students as engaged, psychologically- and climate-literate citizens.

Psychology education has the potential to contribute to positive change in addressing the climate crisis. Embedding climate change education is too important to ignore.

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Educational excellence and equity: What role for evidence use?

JO GLEESON

MARK RICKINSON

The recent *Summary Report of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* (Australian Government, 2023) makes clear that excellence and equity remain significant challenges for the Australian education system.

Recommendations to lift student outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged cohorts, centre around students receiving 'high-quality evidence-based instruction' (p. 10), educators accessing 'quality-assured and evidence-based professional learning programs' (p. 11) and school systems implementing 'evidence-based approaches' to improving equity (p. 13).

These calls follow similar kinds of developments internationally (see, for example, Brown & Malin, 2022; Burns, 2023), and reflect a growing recognition that research and evidence use by educators to inform their decisions and practices can lead to improved and more equitable teaching and learning outcomes (see, for example, Malin & Brown, 2022; Mincu, 2015).

For such calls to be effective, they need to engage with and respond to the complexities of using research and evidence in reality (e.g. OECD, 2022). In Australia, like many other countries, school-based educators face a myriad of challenges to integrate research and evidence-based approaches into their work, including access to and time to engage with evidence, as well as the skills and confidence to do so (Rickinson et al., 2021). Any system reforms, therefore, need to not only highlight effective evidence-based approaches but also build capacity for their implementation.

THE MONASH Q PROJECT

The work of the Monash Q Project, a five-year study to understand and improve the use of research evidence in Australian schools, provides some potentially helpful insights on this issue (Rickinson et al., 2024). It shows that, at the school level, effective implementation of evidence-based approaches relies on:

- teachers being able to identify, access and interpret appropriate approaches that will work in their specific context, particularly in relation to the diverse learning and wellbeing needs of different at-risk cohorts;
- school leaders' acknowledgement that research and evidence use is complex work that connects to educators' professionalism and requires targeted and ongoing professional learning; and
- an investment of time and effort from school leaders and teachers alike to sustain research and evidence use over time such that teaching and learning outcomes improve.

The bigger picture question is: What can be done at the system level to support this kind of evidence-based practice within schools? The Q Project's recent report, *Using Research Well as a System* (Rickinson et al., 2023), speaks to this question. Based on responses from over 2100 teachers and school leaders, it identifies six ways that system organisations (such as national and state jurisdictions, universities, evidence brokers, and professional associations) can support evidence-based practice within schools (Table 1).

TABLE 1: SIX SYSTEM ENABLERS OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS

SYSTEM ACTIONS	RATIONALE
SUPPORTING EDUCATORS	
1. Skill development	Evidence-based practice is highly skilled work that needs to be supported with appropriate capacity building. However, educators report insufficient provision of, and support for, such professional learning.
2. Professional recognition	Evidence-based practice is linked to how educators understand and enact their professionalism. Educators indicate that strong system recognition of their evidence use and professionalism is critical.
SUPPORTING SCHOOLS	
3. Evidence access	Access to appropriate research and evidence is a key enabler of evidence-based practice. However, educators report that they lack knowledge of, and access to, different sources of evidence.
4. Dedicated time	Evidence-based practice involves an explicit investment of time and effort, making scheduled time a critical enabler. However, educators report having insufficient time at school to engage with research and evidence.
SUPPORTING SYSTEM LEADERSHIP	
5. Modelling evidence use	The practices of leaders at both system and school levels are critical enablers of evidence-based practice. However, system actors' current evidence use attitudes, practices and confidence are highly variable.
6. Sharing useable evidence	For educators to develop evidence-based practice, research and evidence needs to be useable. However, educators express concerns about the useability of evidence produced and disseminated by system actors.

Against a backdrop of increasing calls for evidence-based approaches in education, the above actions at a system level represent a much-needed, but often missing, part of the national reform effort. If we are serious about equity and excellence, then concerted effort is needed to close the gap between aspirations about the promise of evidence-based approaches and productive action on the ground that supports educators to use research and evidence well within their work. As Maxwell and colleagues (2022, p. 1) have argued, 'weakness in any area of the system' can impede evidence-based educational improvement.

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Addressing the gaps in teacher preparation: A one-size-fits-all approach does not exist

BRAD BLOOMFIELD

RUSS FOX

Although it is not a new problem, there is a growing awareness of the challenges of disruptive behaviour in Australian schools. In 2023, a senate inquiry into increasing disruption in Australian classrooms highlighted the impact of disruptive classroom behaviours on students and on staff (Parliament of Australia, 2023).

The behaviour of students in schools is a complex, multifaceted problem that does not lend itself to a universal, standardised approach that can be easily applied in Australian school classrooms. While a concerted effort into supporting students' success in the classroom is warranted, fewer resources have been directed at supporting teacher pre- and in-service professional development (Fox et al., 2022). Teachers enter the workforce wanting to make a difference but are quickly burnt out, affecting their health and wellbeing (Longmuir et al., 2022). There is a gap in training and support that empowers teachers to confidently support their students in the classroom (Fox et al., 2021).

THE ROLE OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teacher professional development (PD) plays a critical role in closing the gap between teachers' knowledge and practice and the needs of their students (Donath et al., 2023). The most effective PD programs provide opportunities for the development of teacher knowledge through explicit content instruction that coheres with previous learning, include active learning opportunities for teachers, such as modelling, rehearsal, and provision of feedback, and also include ongoing embedded supports for the teacher, such as ongoing coaching or peer collaborations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2023).

Although the key ingredients of PD programs are understood, the overall effects of PD programs vary significantly. In one examination of teacher PD programs in inclusive education, there were found to be large effect sizes on the development of teacher knowledge of inclusive practices, moderate positive effects on teacher skill development, small to moderate effects on student behavioural outcomes, and small effects on teacher belief (Donath et al., 2023). Critically, active learning was the only PD component significantly related to increasing teacher skills. Another meta-analysis provided evidence validating the key ingredients presented in their PD model, but found significant variance in the outcomes across the PD programs studied (Sims et al., 2023). Such models focus on statistical analyses of student outcomes to identify effective components of PD programs, rather than engaging in qualitative explorations of teachers' experiences of PD programs. Supporting teacher agency as part of PD delivery allows teachers to apply their professional expertise, experiences, and identity and to adapt and contextualise their learning (Carpendale et al., 2021).

MOVING FORWARD

Given the complex dynamics in Australian and international classrooms, the pressure on teachers' workloads, the growing rates of disability identification in schools, and the current significance of students' learning and behavioural needs, PD must be efficient, effective, and empower teachers to develop their skills in ways that respect their autonomy and build their identities as professionals.

A multi-tiered system of support may be one promising way to deliver PD efficiently and effectively to teachers in ways that meet them at their point of need (Bloomfield et al., 2024). A multi-tiered system follows the logic of a public health framework to provide increasingly individualised support to all teachers. This is a departure from the 'train and hope' or 'wait until they fail' approaches to teacher learning of the past.

First, high quality PD that incorporates the active ingredients described above is universally delivered to support success and prevent challenges in the classroom. This PD should provide all teachers with explicit instruction of key content, active learning opportunities, and opportunities for collaboration. This is likely to be sufficient for the majority of teachers.

Following this, some teachers who need or would prefer a higher level of support receive individualised support to match their context and needs. This uses a 'response to intervention' approach, where data inform the conversations and decisions about what ongoing and embedded support matches the teacher's and the student cohort's needs. At the most individualised level of support, an expert coach will work intensively alongside a teacher to provide support in their classroom.

The responsive approach that this tiered model provides will distribute resources more equitably and support all teachers to tackle the challenges in today's classroom in the way they need.

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Improving pre-service teacher placement experiences: What might virtual reality offer?

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Pre-service teachers are at a crucial juncture where they need to delve into and discuss fundamental teaching practices, such as behaviour management, lesson planning, assessment, differentiation, and inclusion. These practices require them to have a range of classroom experiences, from managing student interactions to tailoring lessons to meet diverse learning needs.

However, securing these valuable classroom experiences for pre-service teachers is becoming increasingly challenging due to logistical difficulties and the current teacher shortages plaguing the country. This scenario is further complicated when mentoring teachers hold differing views on teaching and learning approaches, requiring pre-service teachers to navigate these varied perspectives into a coherent teaching strategy – a task acknowledged for its complexity (Livingston, 2017).

Teaching experiences are not just about time spent in the classroom; they also involve exposure to best practices in pedagogy and the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings and to reflect on their teaching practice. Yet, the variability in these experiences points to a need to rethink traditional teacher training placements.

Complicating matters, recent research in Australia highlights that workload and coping with stress are significant factors driving teachers away from the profession (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2023). How can we design professional experiences that not only prepare pre-service teachers for the realities of teaching but also equip them to manage the pressures of the job effectively (Rajendran et al., 2020)?

In this context virtual reality (VR) emerges as a promising tool, offering unique space to explore and simulate the complex challenges faced by teachers. VR can provide a platform for pre-service teachers to develop their confidence and readiness for the classroom in a controlled, shared, environment. By simulating a wide range of classroom situations, from inclusive teaching strategies to differentiated curriculum, virtual platforms can provide a depth of experience that traditional teacher preparation might lack.

However, the focus when using VR spaces must remain on teaching practices and the core skills and knowledge required to navigate the educational landscape. This ensures that the emphasis is on enriching the pedagogical skills of pre-service teachers rather than on the technology, preparing them for the practical realities of teaching and fostering their growth as educators.

VIRTUAL LEARNING

VR offers the ability to experience 360-degree videos of classrooms in action, enabling pre-service teachers to pause, reflect, question and review what they see. These 360-degree videos are recorded in Australian classrooms, receive little to no editing, and show a typical class. The VR experience, then, provides a compelling platform for student teachers to understand real teaching and learning in a classroom environment (Ma & Cavanagh, 2019). The capability for individuals to look around the room and observe the class offers a nuanced interaction within the classroom that is usually reserved for live experiences.

An emerging technological development is software that enables recorded video to be sent to a set of VR headsets simultaneously (Showtime VR, 2022). Controlled by a teacher-researcher via an iPad, pre-service teachers wearing VR headsets can be 'dropped' into a classroom together and experience that classroom as if they were there. This synchronous interaction in VR offers a unique opportunity for classroom practice to be collaboratively unpacked, annotated and revisited in depth. This method is less intrusive than traditional observations in a real-world classroom, allowing for a more focused and reflective learning experience. Additionally, the virtual platform provides an invaluable space for expert teachers to draw out and address hidden assumptions, biases or beliefs that teachers may hold. These are elements that can be challenging to identify and confront in the unpredictable environment of a busy physical classroom. As a result, pre-service teachers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of classroom dynamics and student interactions, equipping them with the tools and confidence to navigate the complexities of modern education.

Bringing student teachers together with VR technology may also help to alleviate some of the pressures and demands placed on in-service teachers, who are often tasked with mentoring pre-service teachers in addition to their regular teaching responsibilities.

While the use of VR in teacher training offers numerous benefits, there are potential challenges. The nuances of student behaviour and the unpredictable nature of classroom interactions may not be fully captured in a virtual environment. The risk of devaluing real-world classroom experiences, along with initial costs and technical expertise requirements, position VR as a complementary, rather than a standalone, tool.

Overall, VR classrooms provide a space to explore the more challenging parts of teaching, such as student behaviour, difficult parent interactions and diverse learning needs. With increased exposure to the realities of classrooms, we can hope to give a realistic perspective on the role of the teacher in today's schools. As the media continue to highlight the challenges inherent in being a teacher (for example, Sciberras, 2023), we can leverage VR technology to help pre-service teachers be informed, ready and excited to begin their teaching careers.

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Teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in content areas

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How can primary and secondary teachers support English as an Additional Language (EAL) students' learning in content areas?

SPECIALIST EAL FUNDING IS LIMITED

Globalisation has resulted in increasingly multicultural schools and Australia's are no exception. Currently in Victoria, 34% of all students come from a language background other than English. Of these, 12% receive EAL funding in mainstream schools (Victoria State Government, 2023). This funding is commonly used to employ an EAL specialist teacher to provide language support. Each EAL student typically receives language support for a few hours each week.

For the majority of the school week, EAL students attend content area classes with their non-EAL peers. These classes are taught by content area teachers who have specialised in primary teaching or in secondary subjects such as music, history, science, or mathematics. Content area teachers do not typically have formal qualifications in EAL teaching.

Although content area teachers have students' best interests in mind, they do not always meet EAL students' learning needs (Premier, 2021). EAL students often develop conversational English skills quickly, sometimes in as little as one to two years, but it can take five years or more to develop academic English skills (Cummins, 2011). This includes subject-specific language used in content areas. However, content area teachers do not always have a strong understanding of second language acquisition and related teaching practices (de Jong & Harper, 2005) and might not realise that EAL students with strong conversational skills could need help with their academic language skills. They also might not be aware that EAL students need additional support with language skills in their content areas, especially with subject-specific language (de Jong & Harper, 2005). As a result, the academic needs of EAL students can be overlooked in content area classrooms and they can struggle with their learning (Safford & Costley, 2008).

THREE KEY ACTIONS TO HELP SUPPORT EAL STUDENTS

These three key actions will help primary and secondary teachers support the learning of EAL students in content areas.

Key Action 1: Allow students to use their home language in the classroom

Using home languages (usually the EAL student's first language) in the classroom has been found to enhance learning outcomes for EAL students (García & Lin, 2017). It can assist students with making connections to prior knowledge and, consequently, help them understand information in English.

Key Action 2: Engage in formal and informal collaboration with EAL specialist teachers

Formal collaboration could include content area teachers and EAL specialist teachers planning lessons together or team-teaching. Informal collaboration could involve sharing teaching resources or engaging in conversations about teaching practices (Premier & Parr, 2019). Content area teachers will be able to enhance their capacity to support the learning of EAL students by working collaboratively with EAL specialist teachers.

Key Action 3: Participate in ongoing professional learning related to teaching EAL students

Professional learning about EAL teaching should occur regularly and could be formal or informal (Premier, 2021; Premier & Parr, 2019). Both formal and informal professional learning should focus on the specific needs of the EAL students at the school and be tailored to suit the level of experience of the content area teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This will ensure the professional learning is relevant to the content area teachers and will allow them to implement new knowledge from the professional learning in their teaching immediately.

WAYS FORWARD

The three key actions can be included within initial teacher education and in primary and secondary schools.

Initial teacher education plays an important role in preparing pre-service teachers for multicultural classrooms (Premier & Miller, 2010). Pre-service teachers can be made aware that using home languages can support learning. They can be encouraged to allow their EAL students to use home languages in classrooms (Turner, Nguyen, & Premier, 2022). Pre-service content area teachers can be provided with opportunities to collaborate with pre-service EAL specialist teachers during their studies (Nguyen, Turner, & Premier, 2023). Content area teachers will consequently enter the profession with a foundation in two of the key actions. They will be able to build upon their existing knowledge and engage in the third key action by participating in relevant EAL professional learning throughout their career.

Existing teachers can be supported in the three key actions by their school leadership teams. School leadership teams can create a school environment where EAL students are encouraged to use their home languages in the classroom. They can also provide opportunities for formal and informal collaboration between content area teachers and EAL specialist teachers (Premier, 2021; Premier & Parr, 2019). In addition, school leadership teams can organise formal and informal professional learning about EAL teaching throughout the school year and encourage the implementation of this professional learning in content area classes (Premier, 2021; Premier & Parr, 2019).

Including these three key actions within initial teacher education and in schools will help primary and secondary teachers support the learning of EAL students in content areas. This will bring us closer to overcoming this big education challenge.

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Kindness counts: Promoting kindness to support young people's wellbeing

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ANDREA REUPERT

A survey of 139,000 young people conducted in 2023 revealed that 14% of primary students and 20% of secondary students struggled with life satisfaction. One-third of all students acknowledged experiencing high levels of anxiety, depression or both, and indicated that their mental health and wellbeing were a primary concern. One-quarter of primary and one-third of secondary students reported low levels of hope (Kohler & Reece, 2024).

It is clear from this data that the wellbeing of young people in Australia requires commitment and resourcing. Given that there are unacceptable waitlists for psychological services, and helping professionals remain in high demand (McLaughlin et al., 2023), a new way of thinking about this problem is required.

Young people's mental health and wellbeing is the collective responsibility of caregivers, educators, helping professionals and services across education, health and welfare. All stakeholders require the input of young people into how and what this support might look like. Individually, we need to reflect on the actions we can take to safeguard young people and ensure different environments promote their mental health and wellbeing.

A CALL TO ACTION

One way to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people is to deepen our understanding and promotion of prosocial behaviours. Prosocial behaviours are defined as attitudes and actions that demonstrate genuine concern for others through kindness, empathy, and altruism (Caprara & Steca, 2005). Importantly, it is becoming increasingly clear that kindness is not only useful to the recipient, but also, just as importantly, to the person who is being kind (Van Tongeren et al., 2016).

Our motivation to engage in prosocial behaviours can vary (Post, 2005) but is ideally driven by one's values rather than by extrinsic rewards. Acts of love and kindness can dispel negative feelings, such as fear or hatred (Fredrickson, 2003) and contribute to understanding and trust within populations, which in turn can lead to socially respectful and functional societies.

BEING KIND CAN LEAD TO IMPROVED MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Aristotle (350 B.C./1985, p. 1159) affirmed that people's happiness is enhanced 'by loving rather than in being loved.' Likewise, our engagement in prosocial behaviours has been connected to life satisfaction, with acts of kindness and altruism contributing to increased happiness, resilience, improved mood and better mental health, especially when generous acts are volunteered without expectation (Kerr et al., 2015; Post, 2005; Fredrickson, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2003).

BEING KIND CAN LEAD TO IMPROVED RELATIONSHIPS

People who engage in prosocial behaviours demonstrate a genuine desire to benefit others and to improve their wellbeing. Giving and experiencing prosocial behaviours can promote human connection, with Caprara and Steca (2005) purporting that helping others is vital to sustaining healthy mutual relationships.

Prosocial behaviours provide reciprocal benefits and improved wellbeing for both the helper and the recipient (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010) and can promote reflection and self-insight (Fredrickson, 2003). Altruistic acts provide the helper with increased feelings of self-efficacy, competence and satisfaction (Caprara & Steca, 2005; Midlarsky et al., 1995), while the receiver can experience increased feelings of hope, connectedness and validation when experiencing these voluntary acts of generosity (Post, 2005).

PROMOTING KIND BEHAVIOURS

It is important not to prescribe or force the enactment of prosocial behaviours in young people. Autonomy and freedom of intention are critical to strengthening the authentic mutual exchange of positive experiences between givers and receivers. Moreover, young people's demonstration of caring and kind behaviours should not be ignored. People tend to repeat behaviours, both positive and unhelpful, that are noticed (Pratto & John,1991). For example, when a teacher actively acknowledges a student's positive behaviour, it is likely to be reflected on and repeated. To that end, simple acknowledgement statements are the most powerful:

"I noticed you include others in your game."
"I noticed you share your pencils."

This approach has been labelled 'strategic noticing' (Ervin, 2022). Strategic noticing involves simultaneously providing attention and validating something that is indisputably true. Even if young people find these statements strange, they contribute to reinforcing and continuing to apply positive behaviour towards others. Additionally, adults must frequently model demonstrations of love, kindness and empathy towards young people to promote feelings of belonging (Allen & Kern, 2020) and to strengthen psychological and physical wellbeing (Post, 2005).

We propose that increased awareness of the benefits of prosocial behaviours for both the giver and receiver, along with a commitment to frequently engaging in acts of kindness and altruism, could, in part, be an antidote to cynicism. By uplifting and validating the importance of young people and our collective responsibility to guide and support them, we hope they will inherit, and continue to grow, a functional and harmonious society.

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Building self-determination to foster better outcomes for young people with disability

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'Nothing about us, without us' encapsulates the well-established human right for all people to be involved in the decisions that affect them. So how can we ensure young people with disability can access this right?

The recent Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) highlighted that significant barriers continue to impede the access of young people with disability to a safe, high-quality and inclusive school education, and to an inclusive and just society that supports their quality of life, safety, and independence. Across their lifespan, young people with disability are more likely than their peers to experience higher rates of discrimination, isolation, exclusion, neglect, abuse, unemployment, income inequality, morbidity and mortality (Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing, 2022).

Research has linked self-determination – in which people with disability have agency in their life – to improved quality of life, along with improved educational, health and wellbeing outcomes (Wehmeyer, 2001; Gaumer Erickson et al., 2015; McDougall et al., 2010; Shogren et al., 2015). Moreover, when young people with disability come together to form a collective self-determined approach to tackle social justice issues, such as discrimination and exclusion, we are more likely to see sustainable and scalable changes to policy and practices that benefit the disability community (Bertrand, et al., 2020).

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL DISABILITY INSURANCE SCHEME

The Australian *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013* is the second biggest social reform in the health sector in Australian history. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) hinges on the foundational principle of self-determination, including the need to 'enable people with disability to exercise choice and control in the pursuit of their goals and the planning and delivery of their supports' and 'promote the provision of high quality and innovative supports that enable people with disability to maximise independent lifestyles and full inclusion in the community' (*NDIS Act 2013* Cth pt. 2, s. 1). Similarly, providing people with disability with 'the power of choice, independence and the dignity to take risks' was a core component of the Royal Commission's vision for the future. The NDIS review (Bonyhady & Paul, 2023) identified that those providing and coordinating support to young people with disability lack the knowledge needed to help a young person with disability develop self-determination skills. Consequently, decisions are frequently made for, rather than with, young people. The resulting limited opportunities for self-determination can mean that the treatment and support young people receive are mismatched to their needs and personal goals.

To address this, the NDIS review recommended that people with disability receive support for decision making and the development of self-determination skills. It also recommended that the support network around people with disability receive training in supported decision making, including the use of disability-led approaches and peer networks. However, other than post-school transition interventions, there is scarce research on effective approaches that families or people in education, health and community settings can use to build self-determination skills from early childhood through to late adolescence. As a result, training and intervention programs do not have a strong evidence base to draw from to ensure meaningful and effective gains are achieved.

A SELF-DETERMINED LIFE

The NDIS review called for greater connectedness between health, education and community services. This aligns with growing calls for interventions for young people with disability to be situated within the natural landscapes of childhood such as education and community settings (Rinehart et al., 2018). In his address for the release of the NDIS review, the Minister for the NDIS and Government Services, the Hon. Bill Shorten MP, stated 'We don't want kids enduring childhoods of 40 hours of weekly therapy where there is no evidence of it being beneficial. Kids deserve the chance to be kids' (Shorten, 2023).

Creating the necessary conditions for a self-determined life are central to the success of Australia's social reform agenda for children with disability. Many opportunities for young people to make choices and decisions, and to develop self-awareness, self-regulation and problem-solving skills, naturally arise as they play and learn in their home, school and community (Walker et al., 2011). Therefore, these settings provide a particularly abundant landscape for fostering self-determination from an early age. Families, coaches, and education professionals thus play a critical role in providing rich opportunities for young people to develop self-determination across their development. It follows that the development and evaluation of training and resources targeting family, education and community settings presents a cost-effective, low-burden opportunity for improving the self-determination of, and outcomes for, young people with disability. Equally important, work to improve self-determination in young people must also facilitate their collective self-determination by engaging them as leaders and co-creators within this work.

While there is much to learn and do around self-determination, reflexivity – questioning and changing practices, policies, procedures and assumptions that promote harmful values (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015) – is an immediate action that organisations and education settings can take. The following three questions can serve as a simple starting point to guide thinking about how to support the self-determination of young people with disability.

- Do we provide opportunity for young people with disability to tell us how they would like to be supported?
- How can young people provide feedback, and how is this feedback actioned?
- What training and guidance do we provide to staff and volunteers about how they listen and engage with young people's thoughts and ideas?

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It's time we take neurodiversity seriously

'*It's time we take neurodiversity seriously*' was written in consultation with neurodivergent staff and student members of the Monash University community.

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Universities are centres of knowledge creation and sharing that play an important role in shaping productive and inclusive societies (Merchant et al., 2020). For such institutions to truly model inclusivity and maintain academic excellence, the experiences of neurodiverse students and staff must be understood, their strengths valued and their needs addressed (Mellifont, 2023).

Students with disabilities, including those who are neurodivergent (autistic, dyslexic or ADHDers), are one of the fastest-growing cohorts in the tertiary sector (Department of Education, 2023). Although universities have support services and offer various technologies to meet specific needs, the fear of stigmatisation and labelling creates a divide between what is needed and what is available to facilitate the success of students and staff (Clouder et al., 2020).

Because educational approaches do not always accommodate cognitive differences, many neurodivergent students experience university as a challenge and report higher cognitive and emotional loads than others. (Godfrey-Harris & Shaw, 2023). Despite legal requirements for accommodations under disability laws, universities often struggle to provide appropriate support for neurodivergent students and staff. Bureaucratic processes can be complex and navigating them can be overwhelming and discouraging for neurodivergent individuals (Godfrey-Harris & Shaw, 2023; Merchant et al., 2020). Structural stigma within the university system may lead to discrimination against neurodivergent students and staff.

KEY PRINCIPLE 1:
SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Policies that promote inclusion and diversity are necessary but are not sufficient to create environments that meet the needs of neurodivergent individuals. Addressing systemic issues requires that universities engage with neurodivergent individuals to identify what works and what doesn't across their work and study lives. Flexible and supportive learning and work spaces will make universities accessible not only to neurodivergent students and staff, but also to others who struggle with the structure of university (Larsen, 2018).

We recommend that universities develop and enforce clear policies, ideally co-designed with representatives of diverse student populations, that mandate equal access to education and employment opportunities for neurodivergent students and staff. Universities should establish transparent and easy to use procedures for requesting and implementing accommodations, including academic adjustments, for neurodivergent individuals. Such processes should manage any risks of self-disclosing and reduce the administrative onus on the individual. Regular accessibility audits of campus facilities, digital platforms, and learning materials can identify and address barriers for neurodivergent students and staff. Finally, universities should also ensure that policies related to discrimination, harassment, and accessibility are regularly reviewed and updated in partnership with neurodivergent students and staff and align with current best practices and legal requirements.

KEY PRINCIPLE 2:
'NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US.' CO-DESIGN AND PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

The essence of inclusive practices means working together regardless of abilities or disabilities. Co-designing resources, material, policies and approaches towards support and accommodations – from conceptualisation to finished product – with neurodivergent students and staff is the starting point. This recognises and values the skills and expertise that neurodivergent individuals have gained through lived experience. When people feel included, we see participation, acceptance, recognition and achievement, along with feeling a stronger sense of belonging to a community.

KEY PRINCIPLE 3:
UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

Many of the adjustments for neurodivergent people fall under universal design, where environments and processes are designed to be widely accessible, regardless of disability, age or culture (Jwad et al., 2022; Rose, 2000). Universities can leverage the Universal Design for Learning framework to foster an inclusive and accessible environment for neurodivergent staff and students:

Multiple means of representation: delivering information to staff and students in various formats, including written, audio, and visual materials, and incorporating captions and transcripts for videos and supplementing written content with diagrams, charts, and simulations.

Multiple means of engagement: providing staff and students with a range of options, such as flexible work or study schedules, written summaries of meetings or allowing recordings, or environmental accommodations, such as quieter spaces or comfortable furniture.

Multiple means of action and expression: allowing flexibility in how tasks are completed, such as the format in which students present their work (digital, physical or oral) or breaking down complex job tasks or assignments into smaller, manageable steps.

KEY PRINCIPLE 4:
EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY

Promoting a diverse workforce presents strengths and opportunities. To create a more accepting and inclusive working environment, strengths need to be recognised and celebrated. The neurodivergent brain is different, not lesser. Cognitive differences can present as heightened creativity, hyper-focus, attention to detail, passion, enthusiasm or perseverance and resilience, which are in high demand (Walkowiak, 2021). When neurodivergent people find work that aligns with their area of interest, they are often motivated, enthusiastic and high-performing. Managers of diverse employees report that they enhance public reputation, workplace productivity and quality, and employee innovation and engagement (Austin & Pisano, 2017). By providing an inclusive, understanding and accommodating environment where there is no need for camouflaging or masking, barriers to employment for neurodivergent people can be reduced (Finn et al., 2023), opening a multitude of opportunities for students, staff and workplaces in the tertiary sector.

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