

Elevate Australasia

AdvanceHE

Wellbeing and relational approaches



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From the Editor

We are delighted to share the fourth and final set of case studies as part of the Elevate Australasia program for 2025-26. The Elevate program was designed to support institutions around the world with the challenges they face in educational excellence and student support. The Australasia edition dealt specifically with challenges such as evolving student needs and new regulatory pressures specific to the Australasia region.

As part of the program we invited submissions to a digital showcase of case studies, demonstrating good practice initiatives from across Australasian higher education providers that could be adapted into good practice across the region. In the fourth edition of the showcase, we share five case studies which look at programs and schemes which aim to support student wellbeing and develop relational approaches to learning and teaching.

They cover staff development and modelling vulnerability to counter burnout, intercultural competence in global learning, inclusive teaching for student mental health, co-designed peer mentoring in physiotherapy, and disability-inclusive work-integrated learning in healthcare education, all foregrounding relational, community-based approaches to student and staff wellbeing.

We'd like to thank all of the authors who contributed to the publication of these insightful, innovative and impactful case studies.

**Dr Elliott Spaeth, Senior Consultant, Inclusive Education,
Advance HE**



Staff development and support – modelling vulnerability

Dr Fiona Gill, University of Sydney

Background

This case-study is informed by my experiences as chair of my academic department between July 2023 until the present. Over this period of time, my colleagues and I have faced a number of challenges common to other academics in Australia, including the intensification of work, increased managerialism and high levels of burnout and stress (Kenny 2017, Griffin 2022, Kenny and Fluck 2022).

In our context, this has been manifested in increased class sizes, and the arrival of AI, combined with decreased autonomy over how and when teaching work should be done with complex systems and bureaucratic and regulatory regimes and a workloading system which fails to account for the 'invisible' labour which is part of so many tasks undertaken by academics. These conditions have been exacerbated by the entry to university of a cohort of students without a strong attachment to in-person learning and who are working increasing numbers of hours in paid employment.

Colleagues have reported a strong sense of isolation, and a loss of a sense of academic community, fragmented by COVID-19 and further exacerbated since. In particular, frustration and alienation from teaching have been expressed, with fewer opportunities available for meaningful interaction with students or the provision of feedback, and less space for pedagogical flexibility or creativity. There has also been greater institutional pressure on academics to constantly improve student feedback scores without a corresponding increase in resourcing.

Taken together, these challenges have had a detrimental impact on the relationship many staff have with their teaching, as they struggle to find value in a context where meaningful or critical education seems to have diminished. An important part of my role was therefore to develop ways of supporting staff while also meeting the institutional needs of improving student experiences and listening to student feedback.

This was particularly significant because for many staff, responding to criticism and instituting creative responses was difficult given the significant structural and institutional barriers, and the lack of control over such central issues such as class size, workload and timetabling.

My aim as chair was to foster a safe, reflective environment for professional growth among my colleagues. This meant combining different approaches to supporting and leading staff. This was important because, while formal mentoring structures and development opportunities exist within the institution, much of the most impactful support occurs informally, through day-to-day conversations, peer collaboration, and shared reflection. Engaging in professional development myself as well as seeking ongoing feedback modelled approaching feedback and development as a normal part of professional practice as I sought to support staff development and improve teaching practices.

Approach

My approach was informed by my philosophy of leadership which is rooted in the belief that effective leaders are not only knowledgeable but also empathetic, adaptable, and committed to fostering a supportive environment. In this sense, I identify most closely with the model of servant leadership. This is a holistic approach which prioritises the wellbeing and development of those being led, thus supporting increased engagement and efficiency. Relying on one-to-one communication and a deep awareness of the followers' abilities, needs, desires, goals and potentials, servant leaders act as role models, inspiring trust through transparency, and provision of information, resources and feedback (Turner 2022).

It has been identified as being particularly well-suited to the higher education context (Letizia 2017). This approach is further informed by my background in qualitative research, and particularly in qualitative interviewing wherein an interview or interaction is understood as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess 1982). The unstructured interview, in particular, is helpful as it allows each party the ability to articulate what is important to them, and allows for a respectful space to explore possibilities and solutions to problems.

But more importantly, it prioritises the importance of actively listening and marks a distinction between 'listening' and 'being heard'.

I draw here on Shalka's argument that we need to move "beyond just seeking to listen to others and instead actually understanding and holding others' lived experiences with curiosity and care. In other words, we are committed as interviewers to seeking to understand others' experiences on their own terms and remembering that there is a real person in front of us, not just data to be collected." (Shalka 2023)

This highlights the distinction between listening and waiting to speak, and instead frames discussions as an opportunity to fully engage and understand what motivates or inhibits the other. Leadership is therefore a reflexive practice, and one which requires emotional and intellectual vulnerability and humility in order to develop rapport and trust.



I encouraged colleagues to engage in the professional development opportunities available to them. This was done through making the opportunities available known to colleagues, and by inviting them to complete them with me. Between July 2023 and March 2025, I completed 12 modules of the Modular Professional Learning Framework (MPLF) which is a programme available at the University of Sydney to support further professional development for educators. Colleagues were invited to complete these with me. I also modelled the responsiveness to feedback by instituting a regular anonymous survey on my own performance as Chair.

Much of this feedback was positive. However, more important were the criticisms and my public response to them:

“I'd like to thank everyone who took the time to fill it in. All of the feedback is useful to me, and I'd like to particularly express my gratitude to those who constructively pointed out areas where I'm going wrong and need to work on things. It is never easy to give negative feedback, particularly to someone known to you, even anonymously, and I appreciate you taking the time to help.”

In responding to criticism, it is often tempting to react defensively. However, feedback can be understood as an opportunity for growth and not a tool for evaluation. It is therefore important to respond with vulnerability, humility and openness.



Outcomes

Three tangible outcomes were observed:

1. An increase in MPLF module completions across all teaching staff categories between 2022 and 2024 was seen (2025 unavailable). This demonstrates increased engagement in professional development among staff:

- a. 2022 12 module completions
- b. 2023, 39 module completions
- c. 2024, 39 module completions

2. Increased engagement by academics in seeking and responding to student feedback as measured through an increase in the number of units of study with a response rate of greater than 30% to the Unit of Study Surveys (USS), reflecting greater understanding and interest in the role of feedback among staff:

- a. 2023: 31/65 units (48%)
- b. 2024: 46/62 units (74%)
- c. 2025: 43/59 units (73%)

3. Student satisfaction scores moved from 4.12 in 2023 to 4.24 in 2025.

These outcomes are significant because they affirmed the success of my approach in developing an environment of mutual trust and respect with most of my colleagues. But more importantly, the act of seeking feedback, and responding to it, fosters a context where feedback is understood as an opportunity for relationship-building, growth and vulnerability. Intentional, inclusive leadership should create conditions for others to thrive. Creating space for honest, developmental dialogue, grounded in evidence and empathy, and engaging authentically and transparently with colleagues, and leading by example, can transform both individual practice and collective morale. It also builds a culture of trust and collaboration.



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Reconstructing global learning: integrating learning abroad and transnational education for intercultural competence

Helen Yang and Rowan Tuttleby
La Trobe University, Australia

Background

Internationalisation has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education, shaping how institutions prepare graduates for an interconnected world. Australian business schools have expanded global partnerships, Learning Abroad programs, and transnational education (TNE) to equip students for intercultural collaboration and global workplaces. The World Economic Forum (2025) identifies global mindset and collaborative problem-solving as critical future capabilities, while the miXabroad Global Benchmark Report (2025) reports that over 85% of students experience enhanced intercultural awareness following global learning programs.

Dietrich's (2025) report further highlights that studying abroad strengthens career skills, supports career development, and enhances workforce readiness. However, international exposure alone does not ensure intercultural competence. Developing intercultural capability requires intentional curriculum design, structured reflection, and facilitated dialogue to convert experience into learning (Yang & Farley, 2025).





The COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural fragilities in traditionally transactional international education models. In Australia, border closures led to significant financial losses, workforce reductions, and leadership turnover in international portfolios. Institutional priorities shifted toward revenue recovery and risk mitigation, often at the expense of pedagogical integration (Yang, 2025). Within this context, fragmentation between Learning Abroad and TNE became increasingly visible. Learning Abroad was commonly interpreted as outbound mobility for domestic students, while TNE focused on offshore delivery of Australian curricula, often with limited exposure to Australian campus and industry environments. Although both expanded global engagement, they frequently operated in parallel rather than as an integrated intercultural learning strategy.

These sector dynamics were reflected at La Trobe Business School. By the end of 2024, New Colombo Plan (NCP)-funded short-term Learning Abroad initiatives linked to the School were no longer operational following COVID disruption. Changes in leadership and competing academic workload demands contributed to limited ownership and continuity. Inbound Learning Abroad aligned with offshore TNE partnerships had not previously been implemented.

The central challenge was therefore not simply restoring participation but reconstructing institutional infrastructure to integrate Learning Abroad and TNE within a coherent, inclusive, and sustainable intercultural learning ecosystem embedded in curriculum and partnership strategy.

Approach

Nature and rationale of the intervention

The intervention (March 2025 – March 2026) addressed structural fragmentation, unclear ownership, and participation barriers that had limited Learning Abroad activation and its integration with TNE partnerships. Learning Abroad was repositioned from a standalone activity to a structured two-way global learning ecosystem embedded within curriculum architecture and partnership strategy. The aim was to shift from a predominantly recruitment-focused approach to internationalisation toward a relational, learning-centred framework grounded in intentional intercultural pedagogy and partnership co-creation, aligned with Professional Standards Framework dimensions of curriculum design, inclusive practice, and collaborative learning.

Five interdependent components were implemented.

1. Academic integration through a cross-disciplinary shell subject

A university-wide elective shell subject, Global Business Learning, was activated to embed Learning Abroad within formal curriculum structures. Partner programs were mapped to this subject to ensure credit alignment and progression. This reduced uncertainty for students and repositioned Learning Abroad as degree-integrated rather than peripheral. The open-elective design enabled participation across disciplines, extending access beyond the Business School and broadening intercultural learning opportunities institution-wide.

2. Intentional intercultural learning design

Two-way Learning Abroad programs integrated cultural immersion with discipline-relevant themes such as sustainability and technological innovation. Pre-departure preparation, guided reflection, facilitated dialogue, and assessment tasks positioned intercultural competence as an explicit learning outcome, informed by transformative learning theory (Chwialkowska, 2020).

3. Inbound Learning Abroad–TNE integration and student partnership

For the first time, inbound Learning Abroad initiatives were intentionally aligned with offshore TNE partnerships, creating structured onshore experiences encompassing language development, cultural immersion (including Australian Indigenous perspectives), industry engagement, and campus participation. This design enabled TNE students to experience academic and industry contexts in Australia not accessible through offshore delivery alone. Outbound students returned as peer ambassadors, sustaining intercultural dialogue and co-creating learning across cohorts.

4. Integrated academic–professional leadership

Delivery relied on coordinated academic–professional collaboration. Academic staff ensured pedagogical coherence; professional staff provided governance, risk management, and advising support. Designated professional roles were critical in enabling program activation and scale.

5. Access and inclusion

Equitable participation was supported through targeted funding and partnership initiatives. Government (NCP) and institutional funding reduced financial barriers for outbound students, particularly those from regional and widening-participation backgrounds. Offshore partner institutions in China supported inbound Learning Abroad for their students, while the Victorian Government International Student Fund (YISF) enabled participation for TNE students from Vietnam, expanding access to onshore intercultural, academic, and industry experiences. Collectively, these measures reconstructed the institutional architecture underpinning global learning and enabled more inclusive participation.



Outcomes

1. Activation and expansion

During the March 2025 – March 2026 period, the intervention generated impact through program activation, expansion at scale, and first-time relational integration.

Activation and expansion of NCP-funded learning abroad

Prior to the intervention, several NCP Learning Abroad initiatives across the Business School and wider university had lapsed due to leadership changes and course discontinuation. Through coordinated redesign and institutional alignment, two previously stalled NCP programs were activated and expanded in collaboration with the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies (ACICIS), extending geographic scope and strengthening the sustainability of NCP-supported global learning. Collectively, these programs increased participation from zero to nearly 40 domestic students undertaking Learning Abroad in Asia in 2025.

First-time TNE-linked inbound learning abroad

Inbound Learning Abroad was delivered for the first time in structured alignment with three offshore TNE partners in China and Vietnam. Over 40 inbound students engaged in immersive language, culture, industry and academic workshops activities, shifting from parallel operation to integrated relational exchange.

2. Educational and relational impact

Structured student reflections indicated perspective transformation among outbound students, including enhanced cross-cultural communication, interdisciplinary collaboration, and applied sustainability thinking through industry engagement. Inbound students reported strengthened intercultural competence, increased confidence in applying theory to practice, and exposure to collaborative workplace cultures distinct from prior learning environments.

Outbound participants continued engagement as peer ambassadors, embedding intercultural dialogue within campus life. Institutionally, Learning Abroad transitioned from minimal participation to sustained outbound and inbound delivery within 12 months. Over \$90,000 in NCP funding was secured for 2026–2027, reinforcing program sustainability. Building on this success, interest from offshore partners in China increased, with participation expanding to three additional partner institutions in 2026.

3. Key messages and future development

This case reinforces the principle that business education must travel through student-centred intercultural learning embedded within an integrated global engagement ecosystem. It demonstrates how reconstructing global learning through the integration of Learning Abroad and transnational education can enhance intercultural competence and create sustainable, relational forms of internationalisation.



Four principles emerge:

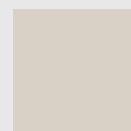
1. **Intercultural competence requires intentional curriculum and assessment design.**
2. **Integrating inbound Learning Abroad with TNE strengthens dialogic intercultural learning.**
3. **Academic–professional collaboration is essential to ecosystem coherence.**
4. **Equity-aligned funding enhances participation and sustainability.**

In a sector facing ongoing financial pressure and restructuring, sustainable global learning requires strategic investment in professional capability and partnership trust.

Future priorities include professional development in intercultural practice, longitudinal evaluation of learning outcomes, and continued research into integrated learning abroad–TNE models as scalable frameworks for relational internationalisation.

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Undergraduate student mental health through inclusive and data informed teaching practices



Md Kafil Uddin, Deakin University

Background

Mental health challenges among university students are an increasing concern in Australian higher education. National studies consistently report high levels of psychological distress, anxiety and depression among young adults, particularly those aged 18–25 who comprise the majority of undergraduate cohorts (Orygen, 2017; Stallman, 2010).

These challenges are closely linked to student engagement, satisfaction, and retention, with poor mental health often contributing to disengagement and withdrawal (Universities Australia, 2020).

This case study addresses rising student stress in Australian higher education, an issue highlighted in national wellbeing and Student Experience Survey data, which emphasise the importance of timely support, clear instruction, and psychologically safe learning environments (Baik, Larcombe & Brooker, 2019). The intervention was implemented across undergraduate and postgraduate computing units and targeted discipline-specific stressors, including cognitive overload, complex conceptual understanding and assessment anxiety. It also responded to institutional expectations for proactive and inclusive student support under the Higher Education Standards Framework (TEQSA, 2021).

Despite this mandate in schools, RRE remains absent from accreditation requirements for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This gap is particularly significant given the rising global tide of authoritarian politics, which includes renewed forms of patriarchal backlash threatening the rights of diverse genders and sexualities, including children's access to comprehensive Sexuality and Relationships Education (SRE). Equipping pre-service teachers with confidence and capability in delivering RRE is therefore critical. When teachers receive quality preparation in ITE, schools require less intensive professional learning post-graduation, reducing dependence on external providers such as NGOs and enabling more sustainable, embedded practice.

Leading scholars in SRE research advocate for arts-based pedagogies as powerful tools for enabling young people and children to connect with one another and co-create ways of being that transcend narrow, prescriptive norms of gender and sexual life (Quinlivan, 2018; Renold & Timperley, 2024). These pedagogies offer young people voice and psychological safety to navigate the complexities and violences embedded within gendered and sexualised social norms.

The core aim of this case study is to demonstrate how embedding wellbeing-oriented teaching practices within curriculum design can reduce student stress, enhance engagement and improve learning experiences. The findings are grounded in multi-year student feedback (2022–2025), which consistently highlights reduced anxiety, increased clarity, and improved confidence in learning.

Approach

A stress-buffering teaching intervention was implemented across multiple computing units (programming, web development, data analytics, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence). The approach was designed to address sector-recognised risks related to student wellbeing while aligning with expectations for proactive and supportive teaching environments (TEQSA, 2021). The approach was informed by Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), which highlights the importance of reducing extraneous cognitive load to improve learning outcomes (Sweller, 2011). In practice, this involved structured explanations, step by-step demonstrations, and carefully sequenced learning activities to support novice learners. In parallel, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles were applied to ensure inclusive access to learning by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2018).



PSF Dimension	Application in the case study
A1 – Design and plan learning activities	Inclusive curriculum design and transparent assessment
A2 – Teach and support learning	Community-building activities and flexible learning approaches
A4 – Support learner success	Early identification of disengaged students through analytics
K2 – Teaching and learning approaches	Application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
K3 – How students learn	Strategies promoting belonging and psychological safety
K5 – Evaluation and enhancement of teaching	Use of engagement data and student feedback
V1 – Respect for diversity	Inclusive teaching practices supporting diverse cohorts
V2 – Equity of opportunity	Flexible learning pathways and transparent expectations
V3 – Evidence-informed practice	Use of sector data and learning analytics

Table 1: Alignment of Teaching Practices with PSF 2023 Dimensions

The intervention aligns with the Professional Standards Framework (PSF2025) through its emphasis on inclusive teaching, evidence-informed practice, and active support for learner success. These principles are consistent with sector-wide priorities that highlight the importance of teaching quality, feedback clarity, and student belonging in improving outcomes (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012). The design of the intervention was informed by longitudinal student feedback, which consistently indicated that clarity, responsiveness and a calm classroom environment significantly reduced perceived stress. Students frequently described tasks as “less daunting” and reported that structured guidance made learning “much less stressful.”

These insights are consistent with research demonstrating that supportive and well-structured learning environments positively influence student wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019).

The intervention integrated three complementary pedagogical frameworks.

First, Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) informed the use of structured explanations, worked examples and progressive task sequencing to reduce unnecessary cognitive burden (Sweller, 2011). This was particularly important in computing disciplines where novice learners are often required to process complex and abstract concepts.

Second, formative feedback principles, particularly those proposed by Hattie and Timperley (2007), guided the provision of rapid, actionable, and continuous feedback. This included timely marking, frequent check-ins, and clear guidance on how to improve performance. Such practices helped reduce uncertainty and evaluation-related anxiety.

Third, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles informed inclusive teaching practices. Content was delivered through multiple formats, including verbal explanations, visual demonstrations, and practical exercises. Flexible learning pathways and supportive classroom communication were used to reduce barriers and promote engagement (CAST, 2018).

To ensure alignment with professional standards, the intervention was explicitly mapped to the PSF 2023 dimensions, as shown in Table 1.

The intervention was operationalised through a structured set of teaching components, outlined in Table 2.

Component	Description	PSF Alignment
Inclusive classroom environment	Early-semester activities to build community and reduce isolation	A2, V1
Transparent assessment design	Clear rubrics, sample assignments, and formative feedback	A1, K2
Flexible learning (UDL)	Recorded lectures, alternative assessments, and accessible materials	V2, K2
Learning analytics monitoring	Tracking LMS participation, attendance, and submissions	A4, K5
Student partnership	Mid-semester feedback and collaborative course improvement	V1, V3

Table 2: Intervention Framework for supporting student mental health

In practice, I acted as both practitioner-researcher and teaching academic, delivering weekly labs, tutorials, and assessment briefings. Students contributed organically through participation and unsolicited feedback, which served as authentic qualitative evidence.

Inclusive practices included multi-modal exemplars, structured recaps, and supportive communication strategies. Additional targeted support was provided for late-arriving and international students, including tailored catch-up pathways and group integration. These approaches align with research highlighting the importance of belonging and inclusion in student success (Thomas, 2012).

The intervention was implemented over multiple teaching periods (2022–2025), allowing iterative refinement. Data collected through institutional evaluations consistently linked clarity, responsiveness and structured teaching practices to reduced cognitive, emotional and assessment-related stress.

Outcomes

The intervention resulted in consistent improvements in student engagement, confidence, and perceived wellbeing across cohorts. Students frequently reported that structured teaching approaches made learning more manageable, with comments such as “made the tasks less daunting” and “much less stressful.” These outcomes suggest that clarity, rapid feedback, and supportive teaching environments can significantly reduce academic stress.

Students also highlighted the value of step-by-step explanations and practical demonstrations in reducing confusion, supporting the application of Cognitive Load Theory in complex learning contexts (Sweller, 2011). Organisational strategies, including clear weekly goals and structured group work, further reduced time-management pressures.

These findings align with broader research demonstrating that clear instruction, timely feedback and inclusive learning environments are key determinants of student engagement and success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012).

To further evidence the impact of the intervention, Table 3 presents a synthesis of teaching practices mapped to specific stressors, supported by verbatim student feedback.

Key messages and transferability

- 1. Instructional clarity is foundational. Structured explanations and worked examples reduce cognitive load and support novice learners across disciplines.**
- 2. Feedback timeliness is critical. Rapid, actionable feedback reduces uncertainty and enhances confidence (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).**
- 3. Inclusive design supports wellbeing. UDL-informed practices create psychologically safe learning environments that encourage engagement and help-seeking (CAST, 2018).**

Future directions

Future work will incorporate short “stress pulse-checks” to quantitatively assess student wellbeing and correlate findings with teaching practices. Further research will explore scalability across disciplines and examine equity impacts, particularly for international and transitioning students.

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Teaching action	Type of stress relieved	Student evidence (verbatim)
Clear, step-by-step explanations	Conceptual confusion / cognitive overload	“He thoroughly and clearly explains the concepts... made coding easier... very helpful.”
Structured guidance	Overwhelm / uncertainty	“Straightforward manner... easy to follow.”
Timely marking	Marks anxiety	“Ticked off tasks on time.”
Rapid responses	Access anxiety	“Quick to respond with emails.”
Actionable feedback	Evaluation anxiety	“Encourages me to push... to new levels.”
Supportive attitude	Affective stress	“Felt comfortable in class.”
Relaxed environment	Psychological safety	“Relaxed demeanor and warm personality.”
Persistent help	Problem-solving frustration	“Helps until you find the solution.”
Organised group work	Workload stress	“Helped us stay on track.”
Transition support	Belonging stress	“Helped me catch up and join a group.”

Table 3: Teaching actions that reduce student stress (evidence from student feedback).

Learning through partnership: co-designing peer mentoring in physiotherapy education

Sarah Barradell, Jackson Stamatakos, Katherine Harkin, Gayatri Joshi and Shirin Kunte, Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

Background

The Master of Physiotherapy (MA-PHYS) at Swinburne University is a two-year Graduate-Entry Masters program leading to professional registration. Students typically transition directly from undergraduate study in a related health field (eg Bachelor of Health Sciences, Bachelor of Exercise Science), and entry is highly competitive. At the time of writing, the program is full fee-paying (approximately \$98,000 AUD overall unless awarded a scholarship). Since the program commenced in 2019, annual planned enrolments have increased from 30 to 100 students.

Students enter the MA-PHYS with established academic identities shaped by their previous studies. However, early in the course, they encounter learning expectations that differ markedly from previous experiences, including greater professional responsibility, applied reasoning, clinical judgement and engagement with professional standards. As students navigate these demands, they are not only acquiring new skills but undergoing a process of professional becoming (Barnett, 2009; Dall'Alba, 2009). For many students, this transition is challenging. Those accustomed to highly structured subjects and consistently high grades can experience uncertainty and self-doubt as they adjust to new ways of demonstrating learning (McKay et al., 2024). Students often describe a sense of 'mark shock', where their early grades do not match their previous academic experiences, even though their marks are often well above average, and part of the developmental journey towards becoming a physiotherapist. The impact of learning during the COVID-19 era, high course fees and increasing cultural and academic diversity among the cohort due to enrolment growth, tends to compound these adjustment pressures for students.

In this context, some students withdraw academically, fall behind quietly or become overly dependent on staff for direction. Some question their belonging within the profession, and a small number withdraw from their enrolment entirely.



When taken together, students can feel as if they are underperforming or uncertain about their progress, when a recalibration of their expectations is most needed. These patterns do not signal a lack of student capability, but rather the need for more intentional support during transition; support that acknowledges uncertainty as a normal part of learning and fosters confidence, connection and learner agency. These conditions highlight the importance of early, relatable, peer-based support that could normalise experience, clarify expectations and complement formal teaching structures.

Approach

In response, in 2025 the lead author (and former Course Director) initiated a semester-long, student-led pilot peer mentoring program, co-designed with Year 2 students who volunteered as mentors. This initiative, embedded within a first-year foundational subject (PHT60002), aimed to provide a safe, equitable space for students to seek guidance, build confidence and develop a sense of belonging within the program and profession.

The initiative was grounded in principles of student-staff partnership (Cook-Sather et al, 2014), positioning mentors as active contributors to the program's design and evaluation. Mentors were conceptualised as legitimate peripheral participants within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), drawing on their recent experiences of transition to support peers navigating similar challenges.

A training and planning day was held with 12 interested Year 2 students, ten of whom proceeded to deliver the semester long-program. Through structured dialogue and reflection, student mentors identified key areas of need based on their own experiences, ensuring the program reflected authentic student perspectives. In total six sessions were co-developed addressing the following topics: Getting to know each other; Studying as a Masters student; Making the most of placement; Taking care of yourself; Academic success; and End of semester skills practice.

A group mentoring format was adopted to maximise access. Two to three mentors facilitated each session. The lead author remained actively involved through ongoing support and debriefing sessions with mentors, ensuring students were connected to academic and wellbeing resources when needed. Four sessions were held on campus and two online. Scheduling was determined by mentor availability (who were often completing their full-time clinical placement at the same time) and/or the timetable of the mentees, who rarely all had classes simultaneously on campus. Attendance at sessions was voluntary, reinforcing the program's positioning as supportive rather than remedial.

Evaluation was embedded throughout the program. After each session, attending mentees were asked to complete a short online survey comprising closed questions and optional open-ended reflections. A longer mixed-methods survey was administered at the end of the semester. Mentors were asked to voice record reflections: prior to their first session, after each session they facilitated and at semester's end.



Participating mentors were given the chance to evaluate the program from both mentee and mentor perspectives and contribute as a 'co-researcher', in line with the principles of student - staff partnership. Five students elected to participate as co-researchers, all of whom were added to the approved institutional ethics submission (20258858-22162). Four mentors contributed to the development of this case study, reinforcing the partnership ethos underpinning the initiative.

Outcomes

The student-led, staff supported program emphasised relational learning: learning with and from one another in a safe, supported environment. The co-creation of the program was a reminder that teaching needs to make space for growth in unexpected ways; learning experiences can land differently when delivered to students by their peers.

While the first session was attended by 62% of the mentees, as the semester progressed, sessions were attended by lower numbers (between 3-46%) with an increase again in the very final session which was held in study without teaching vacation. While every effort was taken to schedule sessions when students were on campus and had breaks between classes, many reported competing demands and time pressures as barriers to attendance. This points to a need to strengthen the visibility and perceived purpose of mentoring and to more deliberately explore the enablers and threats that shape student participation. This will guide refinements to communication and session design, ensuring the program aligns more closely with how students experience and prioritise their learning.

For the mentors, involvement in the program led to perspective shifts as the mentors came to see their own learning journeys in new ways and develop a new-found appreciation of learning from the teacher's position. Mentors reported growth in communication, leadership and professional judgement, particularly when supporting peers navigating sensitive or emotional challenges. Notably, the mentors described forging stronger connections among their own peer group, enhancing their sense of belonging among their cohort, university and profession.

Future steps include the roll out of the program with new cohorts, with past mentors contributing to training and program refinement to support sustainability. The program may expand to a year-long format, with smaller or more targeted mentoring interactions introduced later in the program once mentors have gained experience.





This case study demonstrates the value of student–staff partnership and co-design in creating meaningful peer mentoring initiatives that support transition, confidence and learner agency. By positioning students-as-partners and recognising the pedagogical value of recent experience, the program created space for learning that complemented formal curricula while addressing affective and developmental dimensions of professional education.

While developed within physiotherapy education, the principles underpinning this work – co-design, partnership and peer-led learning – have relevance across professionally oriented programs seeking to support students through complex educational transitions.

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Blending community outreach and work-integrated learning through authentic beach learning sites

Sasha Job, Luke Heales and Steven Obst, Central Queensland University, Australia

Background

Access to natural environments such as beaches is an increasingly recognised determinant of health and wellbeing (White et al, 2020). For people with disability, beaches offer unique opportunities for physical activity, sensory stimulation, and social inclusion; however, access to beaches is inequitable due to physical and social barriers (Job et al., 2023). Recent Australian surveys confirm that people with disability value beach participation for enjoyment, reduced stress, and improved wellbeing (Job et al., 2026), yet almost half are unable to visit due to accessibility challenges (Job et al, 2023).

Health professional education faces a parallel learning and teaching challenge: preparing graduates for inclusive, community-based practice in increasingly diverse and non-clinical settings. Evidence indicates that many undergraduate programs offer limited and inconsistent opportunities for authentic engagement with people with disability, particularly outside traditional clinical placements, resulting in variable student exposure to safe manual handling, inclusive communication, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Shields et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2024). These gaps have been associated with reduced student confidence, preparedness, and perceived readiness for inclusive practice at graduation (Smith et al., 2024; Australian Government Department of Health, 2025). In contrast, experiential learning embedded within community contexts has been shown to improve student confidence, empathy, applied skill development, and preparedness for practice in diverse environments (Stewart et al., 2024; Shields et al., 2019).



Beach accessibility therefore represents both a community equity issue and a learning and teaching opportunity. U-BEACH responds to this dual challenge by co-designing and delivering inclusive beach initiatives that bring together people with disability, health professionals, surf lifesavers, local councils, community organisations, and university students. Its flagship program, U-BEACH Community Beach Days, creates accessible beach events that function as authentic learning sites, enabling undergraduate healthcare students to apply academic knowledge and develop key professional capabilities, including communication, manual handling, disability awareness and interdisciplinary collaboration, within real-world contexts.

U-BEACH aligns with national sector priorities for work-integrated learning and inclusive education (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023), alongside broader government commitments including Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031, all emphasising authentic learning that prepare graduates for diverse practice environments. At an institutional level, CQUniversity policy emphasises social innovation, community-engaged learning, and graduate employability. By embedding manual handling and accessibility training within real-world, community-driven experiences, U-BEACH responds to these imperatives while advancing equitable participation and authentic student learning.

The initiative is grounded by the BlueABILITY model (Job et al., 2023), which emphasises co-design, collaboration, and capacity-building to improve beach accessibility. Pedagogically, U-BEACH draws on experiential learning principles (Kolb, 1984), together with inclusive and interprofessional education frameworks (Barradell et al., 2025; Patel et al., 2025), supporting tertiary students to develop transferable capabilities such as collaborative practice, cultural competence, and disability inclusion within authentic, socially meaningful contexts. This positioning enables U-BEACH Community Beach Days to function not only as access initiatives, but as intentionally designed sites of scholarly teaching and learning.



Approach

U-BEACH Community Beach Days were designed to address inequities in beach access for people with disability while creating structured, authentic learning opportunities for healthcare students. Manual handling and accessibility training were embedded in real-world contexts to bridge gaps in traditional curricula, where opportunities for disability engagement and applied skill development are often limited.

The initiative was co-designed and co-delivered by CQUniversity staff and students in partnership with people with disability, local councils, surf lifesaving clubs, and community organisations. Students from physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, nursing, and media studies worked alongside lived-experience experts and health professionals. Their involvement extended beyond event delivery to include pre-event training, collaborative planning, and post-event reflection, supporting interdisciplinary learning and shared ownership.

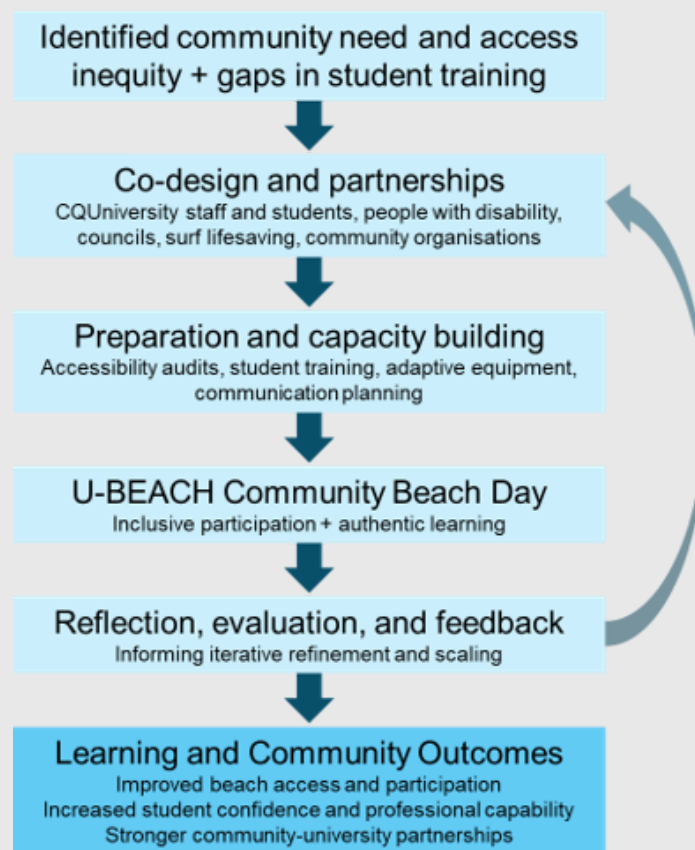


Figure 1. Process and outcomes of the U-BEACH Community Beach Day model, showing how community access inequity and gaps in student training are addressed through co-designed, experiential learning to achieve learning and community outcomes.

Inclusivity was embedded through application of the BlueABILITY framework (Job et al., 2023), with accessibility audits, adaptive equipment, and tailored communication strategies enabling participation for people with diverse mobility, sensory, and psychosocial needs. Delivery was supported through community partnerships and external funding, which enabled access to specialist equipment, training resources, and safe beach infrastructure, contributing to the sustainability and scalability of the initiative. For students, inclusive pedagogy principles supported psychologically safe learning environments, allowing learners to develop confidence regardless of prior experience.

The case study reflects a 3-year period (2023–2025) during which five major beach days were delivered across regional Queensland (Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Mackay). Each event involved extended planning, stakeholder engagement, student preparation, and post-event reflection activities. This iterative process allowed continuous improvement and scalability, informed by participant and partner feedback.

Outcomes

Evaluation of U-BEACH Community Beach Days demonstrated significant impact for both community participants and students. For people with disability, 96% reported improved beach accessibility, 93% gained awareness of adaptive equipment and accessible events, and 88% reported increased confidence to access beaches. All participants (100%) engaged in beach activities, reporting benefits for physical and mental health, social connection and enjoyment.

Student outcomes were similarly strong. Following participation in a U-BEACH Community Beach Day, 98% of students reported applying academic knowledge in real-world contexts, 94% gained exposure to disability across diverse presentations, and 96% collaborated directly with people with disability, families, and service providers. Confidence to work with people with disability improved for 94% of students, while all students (100%) reported enhanced manual handling and mobility aid skills.

Importantly, student reflections highlighted increased confidence, professional identity development, and greater appreciation of co-design and inclusive practice. Iterative refinement across events demonstrated that structured preparation and reflection were critical in supporting student learning, reinforcing the importance of intentional pedagogical design within experiential settings.

Beyond student and community outcomes, U-BEACH has received external recognition for its impact and innovation in inclusive practice. The initiative has been acknowledged through national awards, including the Community Champion Award at the Universities Australia 2024 Shaping Australia Awards and the Best Community Program at the 2023 Australian Disability Service Awards, recognising its contribution to equity, community engagement, and inclusive design. While these awards are not direct measures of student learning, they provide independent validation of the quality, reach, and broader significance of the learning environments in which students participate.

U-BEACH is being formally evaluated through a mixed-methods research program, with findings informing ongoing curriculum refinement and dissemination through conference presentations, publications, and professional development initiatives. A micro-credential, [Introduction to Beach Accessibility](#), has been developed to support broader capacity-building and scalability. While grounded in beach environments, the U-BEACH model is transferable to other disciplines and contexts where inclusive, community-engaged experiential learning can address equity challenges, including rural health, aged care, and outdoor or non-clinical practice settings (e.g., schools, community rehabilitation, disability services, and public health initiatives). By intentionally integrating co-design, experiential learning, evaluation, and dissemination, U-BEACH demonstrates how community-based initiatives can function as sites of scholarly teaching that benefit students, communities, and the wider sector.



Figure 2. Experiential learning and inclusive beach participation in practice. Health professional students apply manual handling, communication, and collaborative practice skills, alongside qualified health professionals, to support accessible beach and water-based participation during U-BEACH Community Beach Days.



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