RESILIENCE, COMPLETE MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

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SUMMARY

Since reforms in Australian higher education in the late 1980s, students from historically under-represented backgrounds (i.e., 'non-traditional' students) have become increasingly the norm. While some argue that widening participation is problematic, research regarding the relationships between non-traditional backgrounds, mental health and academic outcomes has yielded inconsistent results. This research therefore aims to improve the understanding of resilience, complete mental health and academic achievement, among traditional and non-traditional university students. Four independent and related research papers have been produced.

Study One is a systematic review of the definition of the term 'non-traditional student' within mental health studies conducted in higher education settings. Thirteen demographic categories were used to define the concept of 'non-traditional'. Researcher-imposed definitions were found to be ambiguous and highly inconsistent among studies. A student-centred approach to definition (i.e., self-perception) in operationalising the concept 'non-traditional' was therefore adopted in the subsequent research studies.

Studies Two, Three and Four report the findings of three quantitative studies resulting from an online survey which involved 442 first year students from the University of Adelaide. Study Two explores the prevalence and predictors of complete mental health among traditional and non-traditional students. It was shown that 30.5% of participants reported complete mental health. 'Non-traditional' students did not report lower likelihood of complete mental health compared to their traditional peers. Furthermore, an absence of significant adverse life events in the past two years, higher levels of resilience and reported campus-based social support were significantly associated with complete mental health in both traditional and non-traditional students.

Study Three compares the levels of resilience between traditional and non-traditional students. It was found that students who identified themselves as being 'non-traditional', in terms of employment, role as a parent, and age, reported significantly higher resilience compared to students who perceived themselves to be a 'traditional' student.

Study Four explores the relationship between resilience, complete mental health, and prospective first-year grade point average (GPA), controlling for students' demographic factors and known predictors of university academic achievement. Overall, resilience and complete mental health did not significantly predict GPA after controlling for the effect of covariates (e.g., adverse events, motivation). However, students who perceived lower institutional support were found to require a higher level of resilience to achieve the same GPA compared to others. The majority of 'non-traditional' demographic factors identified in Study One, and perception as a 'non-traditional' student did not predict GPA to a significant extent.

The current results have several implications for the development of strategies to improve mental health and academic outcomes among increasingly diverse university students. First, the development of resilience could be useful in promoting academic achievement for some students. Second, resilience and campus-based social support protect mental health for both traditional and non-traditional students and therefore more focus should be placed on strengthening these aspects. Third, there is a need for universities to adequately support students who have experienced a significant adverse event. Fourth, more recognition and understanding of the strengths which 'non-traditional' backgrounds bring is required.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other tertiary institution. In addition, I certify that this work contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time. The author acknowledges that copyright of published works contained within this thesis resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works.

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DEDICATIONS

To Stephen, Christina, Robert, Imm, Clara and Keeven.

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CD-RISC	Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale
CES-D	Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale
CIDI-SF	Composite International Diagnostic Interview - short form
CMH	Complete Mental Health
DCM	Dual-Continua Model
DEEWR	Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations
GPA	Grade Point Average
K-10	Kessler Psychological Distress Scale
MHC-SF	Mental Health Continuum - short form
nAch	Needs for Achievement
NTS	Non-Traditional Students
PHQ	Patient Health Questionnaire
RMHS	Resilience and Mental Health Survey
SEQ	Student Engagement Questionnaire
SES	Socioeconomic Status
TS	Traditional Students