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Creative education leaders nurture student mental health

Many creatives will experience mental health challenges in their working lives, often tapping into confronting subject matter to create emotive content. Leading creative education provider, SAE Creative Media Institute, recognises this and has been supporting up-and-coming creatives with a range of health and wellbeing strategies through its national Student Support Advisor (SSA) team.

The SSA team at SAE is student centred, with a proactive approach to mental and emotional healthcare. Will Centurion is a qualified psychologist and SSA at SAE Melbourne who has over 20 years of experience in the creative industries as a dancer, singer, and actor. Since the beginning of this year, Will has completed more than 200 student consultations.

“We focus on early intervention rather than damage control,” he said. “We make sure we reach out and check in with students at all stages of their journey. It’s our job to make sure that students have someone who advocates for their mental health, while they navigate their studies and the challenges that come with their endeavours.”

Will said this year had been “really tough” for students: “We have had to support students emotionally, psychologically, creatively, as well as spiritually. With all creatives, their craft is so clearly attached to their identity, and as soon as there’s a disconnection there, they feel that quite viscerally.”

These disconnections can be destabilising for students, according to Will. “We are all connected to elements like purpose, structure, safety, creativity, community, goals, hopes and routine,” he explained. “Whenever there’s a disconnection, there’s a lot of negative messaging that fills those gaps - like self-doubt, futility, feeling as though you don’t belong. The bigger the disconnection, the greater the pain. As SSAs it is our job to help students bridge those gaps.”

Advising students that they are not defined by their art and giving them a regular routine has been critical for success, according to Will.

“There’s a big difference between a creative’s personal and professional identities,” he said. “Helping them to reconnect with themselves and their wellbeing is an important part of the process. It could mean they’re then able to maintain their academic activities and commitment to learning.”



“For a lot of students, creating a routine is really important for their wellbeing. For example, what time do they want to wake up, go to campus to study, and do some self-care? It’s about organising their week with as much structure and purpose as possible, so they don’t feel lost.”

With the world enjoying a new normal after COVID-19, Will explained that the focus for the SSA team continued to be on student wellbeing, with the addition of creative growth.

“We’re still supporting students to help them reconnect to their base needs for motivation, routine, order, structure, goals, identity, support and belonging,” he said. “COVID-19 forced us to become isolated in our day to day lives. Coming out of that now, the aim is to create a sense of community and to reinforce the importance of co-regulation - concentrating on their wellbeing and creativity.”

SAE Melbourne student, Lina Ly, who is studying Bachelor of Film, said the past few years had been a challenging period for her.

“I think there were times in previous trimesters where things got quite overwhelming, where my headspace was not great,” Lina said. “Knowing the SSAs, like Will, have been available throughout it all has been a lifeline for a lot of us.

“Getting their advice on things like counselling services, and special consideration for work I have to submit, has been really valuable.”

In the last QILT survey, SAE was ranked number one for learner engagement and student support, compared to Australia’s top five universities. SAE General Manager, Dr Luke McMillan, said every student is valued and supported with their creative journey.

“Positive mental health is a vital part of how we think, feel, and act,” Dr McMillan said. “[The National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) recently found that almost two in five people aged 16-24 years had a 12-month mental disorder.

“Our SSAs are made up of experienced and dedicated professionals. They play an invaluable role in providing a range of strategies to support our students in all aspects of their lives, so they can successfully transition into the creative industry.”

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About Will Centurion

Will is a dancer, singer and actor in the music theatre industry, and has over 20 years of international experience. His numerous Australian theatre credits include the national tours of *A Chorus Line*, *West Side Story*, *The King and I*, *The Lion King*, *Aladdin* and *In The Heights*. He also appeared as part of the top 20 in *So You Think You Can Dance Australia 2010*. After graduating from the Australian College of Applied Psychology, he retired from performing to focus on integrating his stage experience and knowledge of psychology, to create mental health services that target the needs of Australian performers. Using integrated therapies, he helps creative minds navigate the many challenges of the arts industry. Managing issues such as performance anxiety, self-confidence issues, negative self-talk, goal setting and career transitioning, Will provides a platform where performers can access the resources they need to enhance their psychological well-being and enjoy sustainable careers in the creative industries. At SAE Creative Media Institute, Will provides his experience and knowledge to creative media students at the Melbourne campus.

About SAE

SAE Creative Media Institute is the place for creatives and innovators. Since 1976 we've been the leaders in creative media education across animation, audio, creative industries, creative technologies, design, film, games, and music. Every year, we support students globally to develop the skills and experience needed to carve successful careers. Students enjoy access to the latest technology and are taught by industry-experienced faculty, while putting their skills to the test in small class environments. Our graduates become part of a highly-respected global community of creatives that's been around for over 40 years. We pride ourselves on being technically explorative, transformative and brave through our range of creative media programs, from short courses and professional training through to bachelor and postgraduate degrees. In Australia, our programs are delivered at campuses in Sydney, Brisbane, Byron Bay, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide. SAE is a part of Navitas Pty Ltd. More information about SAE is available at sae.edu.au.

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