Mental disorders among university students in Australia:

Web-based cross-sectional survey

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This thesis is submitted to the
School of Psychology, University of Newcastle,
in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Clinical Psychology

31 August 2012
Declaration

1. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a university degree or other similar qualification to any other University or Institution.

2. The work in this thesis was carried out under the supervision of Associate Professor Kypros Kypri, Centre for Clinical Epidemiology & Biostatistics, School of Medicine and Public Health, The University of Newcastle and Associate Professor Jenny Bowman, School of Psychology, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

3. The conduct of this research was approved by the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number H-2009-0366.

4. I hereby certify that a section of the work embodied in this thesis includes a co-authored published paper of which I am a joint author. My supervisor’s signature appears below attesting to my contribution to the joint publication.

Signed:………………………………….. Date:……………………..

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my wife Sally. I can’t thank you enough for the encouragement, love and support you have provided me, both in encouraging me to start this degree and throughout the last three years. Many times I thought completing this degree was beyond me, but you believed in me and that belief was instrumental in me completing this thesis. Thank you I couldn’t have done it without your support.

My supervisor Kyp, you have taught me much about the finer details of research and writing. Thank you for willingly sharing your expertise, guiding me through this process and always making yourself available. My supervisor Jenny thankyou for your supportive feedback on my manuscript and thesis.

To my family, thank you for your belief in me. My parents Emmanuel and Dulcie, thank you for providing me with a great start to life, immeasurable love and a first class education, one that you didn’t have the opportunity to obtain. I feel privileged to have parents who were so prepared to sacrifice so their children could have a good education. My brothers and sisters, Lou, Annette, E and Mon, you have all supported, encouraged and believed in me throughout this process. Thank you. I know I am a very lucky person to have such a loving and caring family.

My friends, I couldn’t have done it without you. Dan you were always there for me with something positive to say, I thank you sincerely. Cindy your support and belief were inspirational, you are a role model for how to be a true friend! Sam, Jo and Al, my uni mates, the journey we have shared has been fabulous. I savour all the laughs we had along the way! Gonz, Geoff and Nicole, thank you for your skilful ability to support me by giving me soft pushes in the right direction towards the end of my thesis. So many other friends encouraged and supported me along the way, too many to mention, if you are reading this then you are one of them and I sincerely thank you.

David Said
August 2012
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Abstract

**Purpose:** To identify variables associated with common mental disorders in an Australian university population.

**Background:** A systematic literature review was conducted to identify research on prevalence and risk factors associated with depression, anxiety, eating and alcohol disorders in university students. The review identified 1200 studies of which 36 met our inclusion criteria. Depression and anxiety disorders were identified as the most prevalent disorders in this group. The main risk factors reported for student mental disorders were: being a woman, being homosexual or bisexual, growing up in a family with low socio-economic status, current financial difficulty and being a man for alcohol disorders.

**Methods:** We invited all Australian based students from a large public university (N=24,209) to participate in a web-based Student Mental Health Survey. Outcome measures included the Primary Health Questionnaire depression, anxiety, and eating disorders modules, and the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test. Explanatory variables of interest included gender, age, year of study, degree type, financial means, parental education, domestic/international status and sexual orientation. Multiple logistic regression analysis was used to estimate independent associations with the four outcomes.

**Results:** Complete responses were received from 6044 students (25%). Proportions reporting depression, anxiety, eating disorders and harmful drinking were 8%, 13%, 14% and 8% respectively, while 30% had at least one of these disorders. The groups with the highest rates of disorder were women, 25–34 year olds, students on low
income, and homosexual or bisexual students. Parental education was not associated with disorder, and nor was an international/domestic status.

**Conclusions:** This is the first study examining mental disorders in a population-based university sample in Australia. Groups in particular need are women, students on low incomes and homosexual or bisexual students. Given increasing student numbers and participation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, policy is urgently needed to promote better mental health in the population, to routinely identify vulnerable students, and to intervene early. A national longitudinal study examining mental health across multiple institutions with oversampling of high risk groups is recommended based on the findings and limitations of this study. There is also need for further research and development of electronic programs which are cost-effective and preventative in nature, as a first response in a stepped care approach to mental health on campuses.