“Let the grown-ups talk”: Allowing for challenging and meaningful dialogue about mental health within tertiary education institutions
Georgia Killick & Ash MacIntyre, University of Newcastle

This presentation discusses the power of narrative in the mental health sphere, and the role of peer-to-peer communication in changing mental health narratives. The University of Newcastle Postgraduate Student Association’s (NUPSA’s) role is to advocate for and engage with the student body, to ensure that student voice is represented in all relevant decision-making throughout the University. As a student-run association with its own staff, who work closely with both University staff and the wider student body, we are in a unique position to speak on this topic.

One of NUPSA’s core concerns is changing the narrative of stigma that undermines postgraduate students’ ability to discuss the issues they face throughout their studies. Research shows that the rate of mental health issues in the postgraduate student population is increasing steadily on a global scale, yet at an institutional level, we still encounter a fear of overstimulating, triggering or scaring students with open dialogue around mental health. While we acknowledge the importance of mindfulness and data collection that permeates Australian University approaches to mental health, we would argue for stronger, more confident acknowledgement of the mental health issues students face, and a greater attempt to recognise the diversity of their experiences. It is only through open, honest dialogue about the realities of mental health that we can make real progress in changing narratives.

Learning outcomes
- Increased ability to view the mental health spectrum from a strengths-based perspective
- Improved awareness of the importance of using the student voice in shaping policy, procedure and institutional responses to mental health & mental illness
- More willingness to engage with genuine conversations about mental health and mental illness.

Presenters
Georgia Killick, University of Newcastle

Georgia Killick is currently working as the Student Rep Support Officer for NUPSA and is passionate about student voice shaping educational institutions, practice and policy. With qualifications in social work and a genuine interest in creating positive change within systems and structures she is always looking for opportunities to learn. She loves to laugh, look at pictures of animals on the internet and always seems to wind up hanging out with the hosts’ pets at parties. She is one of those odd people who loves public speaking and feels most alive when in front of an audience. She should probably be famous. A+, Would recommend.

Ash MacIntyre, University of Newcastle

Ash McIntyre is a postgraduate student serving her second term as President of Newcastle University Postgraduate Student's Association (NUPSA). She is passionate about student voice and improving mental health in the postgraduate student space. Ash is also a casual academic at the University of Newcastle, and her research explores contemporary American fiction in the Anthropocene, with attention to trauma and the New Sincerity. When she is not writing, teaching, or planning extravagant excursions with NUPSA, Ash is likely to be with her three cats or singing loudly and terribly to her Spotify playlist.