

Summary of Key Points

The author has been a dual professional, registered when in practice in Psychology and also as a registered teacher (still current). His involvement in faith-based schools has often been focussed in bringing hope to students where they have had no hope – for example, in establishing a special assistance school for pregnant teenagers and teenage parents as an extension of a school that was formed to invite students with (often multiple) diagnosed mental health disabilities) back into fruitful education. In this, he has been a ‘practitioner researcher’, who now also teaches at the tertiary level (while also helping to establish another school for teenagers with babies).

The focus of this submission is that the Consultation Paper lacks caution in its reliance on some social scientific research related to mental health issues. It appears unaware of recent high-quality research in two key areas (meta-analyses about mental health interventions, and the relationship between religions and mental health). It also does not exhibit sufficient caution in the interpretation of social scientific research study findings (for example, disentangling correlation and causation, or acknowledging sampling problems), illustrated in reliance on a problematic small pilot study for a key argument about staff employment.

Introduction

On the topic of staff employment, there are various types of arguments raised in the Consultation Paper (hereafter “Paper”) as a basis for change, such as dignity and privacy (which are not addressed in this submission). But one type of argument is about mental health issues for LGBTQ+ staff. The Paper also seeks to connect this argument to mental health issues for students and their potential interactions with these students.

This submission comments on three areas of social scientific research methodology that are relevant to the Paper, particularly footnotes which cite research without providing wider methodological context or noting other significant studies.

1. Lack of evidence for effectiveness of suicide prevention and self-harm interventions

The Paper presumes that its proposed changes will reduce mental health problems (including self-harm and suicidal ideation) for LGBTQ+ students. That is, the Paper is suggesting that these changes in law can be construed as an intervention to improve the mental health of LGBTQ+ students and staff. However, a major meta-analysis of current evidence about various types of interventions for suicide and self-injury (Fox et al, 2020) has shown that interventions consistently have small or no effect. In addition, even where effects were found, they were weaker for child/adolescent populations. This meta-analysis was based on 1,125 high quality individual studies and published in a leading international psychology journal (*Psychological Bulletin*). This major study is a salutary warning against assuming that interventions that are intended to help with mental health issues are actually effective. Indeed, enrolment data on the increase in students attending faith-based schools would suggest that they are a preferred schooling environment for all kinds of students.

2. Caution required interpreting social scientific research

Speaking generally, social scientific research needs cautious interpretation. It requires skills that are different from legal skills. Well known problems include:

- *The Correlation – Causation Misunderstanding*: Many studies show correlations between two (or more) variables, or differences in scores on various tests. These findings do not

prove causation between relevant variables. It is therefore wrong to point to one variable (e.g. a person's faith belief) and say 'this correlates with this observed behaviour, and therefore it proves it causes this behaviour'. Roosters crow when the sun appears. Roosters do not cause the sun to appear.

- *Survey Reliability and Validity:* Testing an issue via a survey is usually best done with a group of questions that form a scale that has been shown to have reliability and validity, rather than a single question. To be a strong indicator of effect, these questions would need to be applied to different groups where the variables are controlled, if the researcher wants to consider explanations of causation. Without this, the results from well-constructed surveys are little more than better researched correlational descriptions.
- *Sampling Errors:* There are various challenges to gaining an unbiased sample, such as low response rates, lack of stratification by relevant factors (age, geography, etc.), using pre-existing networks or advocacy groups as a point of contact, etc. Again, to approach better structured research methodologies where human behaviour is concerned requires the kind of control that is not well represented in some of the research cited in the Paper. A well-known example of this difficulty is the poor predictability demonstrated by polling about political choices before elections (and these tend to involve large numbers of stratified respondents).
- *Misleading Significance:* Statistical tests that show a correlation or difference may be statistically "significant", but this is a technical term, not a term of importance. Significance in this sense indicates a probability that what is being described *may not* be a chance finding – but without the controls described above, it can be (and often is) irrelevant to the life context of that being studied.
- *Lack of Replication:* Recent psychological research has demonstrated the need for independent researchers to conduct equivalent studies to seek to replicate findings found elsewhere. Far fewer social scientific findings have proved replicable than was expected, so caution is required with a study (or studies) that have not been independently replicated.
- *Lack of Statistical Power:* Many research projects lack sufficient statistical "power" to detect meaningful differences. The 'power' here refers, in basic sense, to having enough of the right kind of data covering the variables of interest for the research to start to escape the difficulties described above.
- *Collaborative Review:* Research should be subject to expert independent review through well-known journals. This is as opposed to self-published reports or unpublished pilot studies. In addition, there is a move among researchers towards 'open science', where researchers openly share methods, data and analyses with other researchers to help avoid bias or mistaken interpretation.

One or more of these concerns are relevant to the social scientific research studies cited in the Paper at A.33, A.34 and A.36.

To take one example, the Paper cites a pilot study at footnote 154 (Ezzy et al, 2018) which has: a small sample size (16 – of which only 10 came from schools, and only three from NSW, the main focus of concern for the study) and potential issues with subject selection. On page 4 it states: "...

students were not presented with positive role models. However, most interviewees found they could support and encourage LGBTIQ+ students/clients without revealing personal details.”

In the Paper, a central necessary argument for removing the exemption for teachers in faith-based schools is provided at point 3 of A.42:

“...because students are acutely sensitive to the treatment of staff, and exclusion or poor treatment of LGBTIQ+ staff may deprive students of important support mechanisms and entrench feelings of exclusion and associated mental health impacts. A number of stakeholders have suggested that, even without revealing personal details, LGBTIQ+ staff can play an important role in supporting LGBTIQ+ students and ameliorating some of the mental health risks they disproportionately face.”

Despite using text from Ezzy et al (2018) at A.42, the Paper fails to provide the relevant reference as a footnote at this point¹, which limits the ability of the reader to consider potential methodological concerns. That is, the language in the quote above does use the qualifiers such as ‘suggested that’, and ‘can play’, but it is constructed in a way to not raise doubts about the proposed relationship that might arise from reading the pilot study and being aware of, for example, its small sample size. Likewise, the Paper does not give credence to alternative approaches to support within faith-based school communities that help students. That is, the use of the (weak) research base makes the contentions of the Paper at A.42 biased in ways that are not made transparent to readers, and this weakens the case on staff issues.

3. Challenges with interpreting research on religion and mental health

In A.33 it states, “There is evidence that this vulnerability can be compounded for students who are themselves religious” and cites a study by Lytle et al (2018). This study and one other by the same author (Blosnich, De Luca, Lytle & Brownson, 2020) are the only studies known to the author of this submission that have shown this finding. While future evidence may provide stronger support for this finding, it would be premature to rely on two studies from this author for such a significant issue. Also, there is already some research that may be understood as contrary to this cited research. For example, the very large sample studied by Horwitz (2022) indicates that many religious students do better in strong religious communities (homes, school, churches) academically and in life choices that impact their academic results.

More specifically, there are some seemingly inconsistent findings in Lytle et al (2018) that indicate the need for caution: for example, it is not clear why recent suicide attempts among bisexual women would score higher than average if their religious importance was “not important” and “very important” but lower than average for “moderately important”; with the same pattern of results repeated for lesbian women for the measure of lifetime suicide attempts.

Lytle et al (2018) appropriately acknowledge a number of limitations with the study including: lack of information about religious practice; lack of detail about the nature of a person’s faith and their

¹ The Paper also strangely never cites the later published version of this pilot study (Ezzy et al, 2022). This later published version reports that all three NSW teachers said they lost their employment directly or indirectly over discrimination issues. While the views of these teachers are relevant to this debate, this information is important for any methodological assessment of the study sample.

community; low response rate; inability to ascertain causal inferences; and unstable estimates in some cases due to small sample sizes.

Recently, Poorolajal et al (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies with over eight million participants confirming the finding that religion is, on average, protective rather than detrimental for suicide ideation and behaviour. This is consistent with the broader approach of Horwitz (2022) and other research into religious communities, starting with the ‘stress buffering’ studies within Community Psychology of the 1980’s.

Conclusion

In summary, it would be wise for the Commission to act cautiously in interpreting the cited studies (notably Ezzy et al 2018/2022) as more research is needed. It is unwise to use the cited research as ‘the science says’ – because ‘the science’ at this stage needs further work on methodological concerns and sample selection.

References

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