

Ministry of Education
NZ Curriculum Refresh

April 2026

Improve the mental health outcomes for communities

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists submission

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About the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

The RANZCP is a membership organisation that prepares doctors to be medical specialists in the field of psychiatry, supports and enhances clinical practice, advocates for people affected by mental illness and advises governments on mental health care. As a bi-national college, the RANZCP has strong ties with associations in the Asia-Pacific region and is the peak body representing psychiatrists in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The RANZCP has more than 9000 members including more than 6500 qualified psychiatrists and over 2500 members who are training to qualify as psychiatrists.

Psychiatrists are clinical leaders in the provision of mental health care in the community and use a range of evidence-based treatments to support a person in their journey of recovery. The RANZCP is guided on policy matters by a range of expert committees made up of psychiatrists and community members with a breadth of academic, clinical, and service delivery expertise in mental health.

Key Messages

Tū Te Akaaka Roa recommends:

- Strengthening the focus on mental health and wellbeing across all learning areas
- A stronger mental health curriculum within the health and physical education curriculum, with a clear structure that allows ākonga (students) to build knowledge and competencies in mental health and wellbeing practices across age groups
- Refocusing curriculum content towards building understanding of systemic factors impacting mental health in addition to individual self-care
- Integrating hauora Māori and Pacific models of mental health and ensuring content reflects diverse student populations
- Taking a balanced approach to nutrition education

Recommendations

Tū Te Akaaka Roa, the Aotearoa New Zealand Branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Curriculum.

Young people in Aotearoa New Zealand experience high levels of psychological distress compared to other age groups and Aotearoa has one of the highest youth bullying and suicide rates compared to other countries in the OECD. While we understand that young people face complex challenges and acknowledge that schools do not carry sole responsibility for mental wellbeing of young people, a supportive school environment and well-developed curriculum can have substantial influence on their development and enable young people to develop the tools and understanding to support their own wellbeing, as well as that of their peers, whānau and community.

General Comments - A whole school approach

In line with international evidence and the Aotearoa New Zealand [Mental health education guide](#), we recommend a whole school approach to mental health education in combination with dedicated curriculum content focusing on mental health and wellbeing. Taking an integrative approach to mental health education ensures that ākonga are supported to develop a strong sense of self and understanding of mental health and wellbeing and are empowered to apply their knowledge within the broader school context. While we agree that Health and Physical Education is the most suitable learning

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area for dedicated mental health curriculum, we believe it is vital to integrate aspect of mental health education and factors impacting wellbeing across all learning areas.

For example, recognising the impact of historical context, colonisation, language and connection to culture and environment on mental health and wellbeing needs to be addressed across social science, technology and language curriculums while the science curriculum offers ample opportunity to include learnings on the bidirectional connection between physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Additionally, the curriculum refresh presents an opportunity to address key areas of concern for young people in Aotearoa New Zealand identified by Te Hīringa Mahara: whānau wellbeing and intergenerational connections, racism and discrimination, climate and extreme weather events, social media, and worries about their futures (1) to support youth wellbeing more generally. While the Health and Physical Education Curriculum touches on digital wellbeing, other factors are currently missing from the proposed curriculum content.

Tū Te Akaaka Roa recommends strengthening the mental health focus by integrating mental health learnings and content related to key concerns related to youth wellbeing across all learning areas, in addition to a dedicated mental health and wellbeing curriculum. The Mental health education guide may be a helpful resource and offers practical examples of curriculum content (2).

Health and Physical Education Curriculum

In addition to the integration of mental health education across all learning areas, we strongly urge the Ministry of Education to make substantial changes to the Health and Physical Education Curriculum to ensure adequate focus on mental health and wellbeing as part of the learning outcomes for young New Zealanders. We note that a strong understanding of mental health and wellbeing practices not only supports the long-term outcomes of our future generations but enables them to participate fully in school activities and supports learning outcomes overall.

Providing a clear structure and progression

The draft curriculum, in its current form, is fragmented, lacks important foundational skills, and does not offer a clear pathway for learners to progressively build skills and knowledge in mental health and wellbeing.

For example, the curriculum during early emotional development (years 1-3) must ensure that all ākonga have a strong foundation and learn the concepts and tools to help them recognise their own experiences and needs. Notably, the draft curriculum introduces emotional regulation and self-care responsibilities without prior learning to ensure ākonga can recognise their feelings, needs, and understand their emotions or behaviours. While, some students may already be able to identify their needs and feelings, others may need to learn these skills. Neurodivergent young people often struggle to recognising their emotions and may have different needs or be particularly sensitive to environmental factors compared to their peers which must be adequately considered within the learning outcomes. Importantly, ākonga must be supported to understand their emotions and needs without shame, judgement or expectations of being able to manage their expressions of emotion during the early developmental stages.

Additionally, the curriculum must provide ākonga with progressively more complex opportunities to ask for support and build understanding of how they can participate and support the collective experiences of mental health of their peers and communities, as appropriate to their developmental stage. During the

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early years, this may involve specific in-class activities while older ākonga can be provided with more complex scenarios and learn about wider support systems, including pathways of accessing professional support if required.

Tū Te Akaaka Roa recommends the structure of the curriculum be reviewed to ensure it provides a strong foundation and clear progression for healthy emotional development. Importantly, curriculum content must reflect the values it aims to teach across all age groups and offer pathways for ākonga to get engaged in community activities to foster wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

Refocus and expand curriculum to reflect diverse perspectives

The curriculum, in its current form, is heavily focused on individual factors and self-care responsibilities. While it is important for ākonga to develop self-care practices teaching must go beyond basic self-care and egocentric understanding of mental health. While the curriculum acknowledges, in theory, that people have diverse needs and strength, it leaves little room for ākonga to learn how to recognise and develop their own needs and strengths within the classroom environment. Notably, the draft curriculum lacks comprehensive integration of whānau, social and cultural influences and fails to recognise the inherent strength derived from culturally grounded practices.

Educational content must go beyond basic physical needs and consider the importance of whānau, roles and relationships, wairua, whakapapa, environmental factors (e.g., sensory needs), as well as systemic inequities and broader environmental factors (such as climate change). Incorporating varying perspectives and diverse models of mental health, including culturally grounded models of mental health is essential to address the needs of all students, particularly ākonga with Māori or Pacific Peoples whakapapa, neurodivergent, disabled, and/or gender diverse individuals. We note that it is important to offer sufficient flexibility within the curriculum and encourage schools to select specific content based on consultation with their local communities, in line with the Education and Training Act 2020.

Tū Te Akaaka Roa recommends expanding the curriculum to include more extensive consideration of social, cultural and systemic determinants of mental health, the challenges and strengths of diverse populations, and comprehensive integration of te ao Māori and culturally grounded models of mental health as appropriate for the local student population.

Balance approach to nutrition

The draft curriculum includes a strong focus on body image and nutrition. While education regarding healthy eating and nutrition and factors related to body image are important, it is critical that this content is delivered sensitively, considers diverse needs and opportunities and learning occurs without judgement. We are concerned that some of the specific content does not align with contemporary guidance regarding nutrition education in school. Negative and generalised messaging can be harmful and does not adequately consider individual circumstances. Some ākonga may be experiencing food insecurity or have a limited diet due to sensory aversions or personal challenges. It is important to consider the limitations of generalised concepts and avoid absolute or dichotomous statements.

Tū Te Akaaka Roa recommends taking a more balanced approach to food and nutrition with adequate consideration of individual differences and diverse backgrounds of the student population.

References

1. Mahara TH. Young people speak out about Wellbeing: An INsights report into the Wellbeing of Rangatahi Māori and other Young People in Aotearoa. 2023.
2. Education Mo. Mental Health. A guide for teachers, leaders and school boards. 2022.