The experiences of students with mental health difficulties at an Australian Regional University: Overcoming barriers to successful educational and employment outcomes

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Educational achievement is consistently linked to better employment outcomes for individuals, but navigating through higher education can be particularly challenging for regional, rural, and remote students. Some individuals face additional difficulties linked to personal disability, and a particularly vulnerable group are those individuals with an identified mental health issue. Flexibility in study options can enable many students to access higher education, with distance education, a choice for many living regionally, providing both opportunities and challenges for study. The research presented here is part of a project funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), which explored the lived experiences of individuals with a disability at a regional Australian university. The overall focus for the research was to understand individual resilience and what enables some students with mental health problems to be successful in their educational achievement. The present research draws on findings from semi-structured interviews with nine individuals identifying with mental health difficulties. Subsequent analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. The key themes identified were those of disclosure and the decision to register or not with disability services; interactions with 'faculty'; and strategies for positive educational engagement. We concluded that a major challenge in the higher

education sector relates to building disability support services that are responsive to the needs of students with a psychological disability. The findings from this study advance knowledge in understanding what strategies a successful student with a mental health issue draws upon in order to succeed, and what implications this may have for the shaping of student support services.