DARLENE MCLENNAN: Moving on to Professor Sally Kift, and while Sally is getting her screen up, I will just tell you a little bit about Sally. Sally is the Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Fellow of the Australian Academy of Law and the President of Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows. She has held several university leadership positions including the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic at James Cook. She is now one of my favourite people after stepping up to do this presentation at the last minute. Thank you so much Sally for joining us today at short notice. You’re an absolute trooper for pulling this together and we really look forward to hearing disability and the higher education anxiety machine, fitting your own oxygen mask first. Over to you, Sally.

SALLY KIFT: Thank you, Darlene. I have acknowledged the traditional owners in the chat and I’d also like to thank ADCET and ATEND for the invitation to present. This isn’t a slide. This is an overview of what I’m doing. The title What’s that about, Why does this matter, If I might tender an apology, Thinking about what are the stressors and hopefully taking you to some happy places where we can feel gratitude and then leaving you with some practical strategies I’m hoping. I need to make a big disclaimer, this is not my space. I’m not a psychologist. I am a lawyer by training and I do understand, as Gareth Hughes says in the UK, that we must be careful not to pathologise normal responses to an abnormal situation, but I think we can acknowledge this is an abnormal situation and the lawyer in me wants to attempt to define what it is that I’m referring to. Here are some definitions from Universities UK and the Student Mental Health Charity in the UK, Student Minds, who have defined mental health as a spectrum from good mental health to mental illness and distress and wellbeing is the wider physical social and economic experience. So to the title, higher education has been described as an anxiety machine and there is Liz Morrish’s work which I will go to shortly. That made me of course think about Florence + the Machine and their excellent song Shake it Out and it is hard to dance with a devil on your back. The oxygen mask is about the need for us to maintain our own wellbeing, so before we can help our students we need to put our own oxygen mask on or we will not be able to help others. So to why does this matter, well three reasons, one, two, three, one, you matter. If I was putting that in a card that’s what that would look like. Secondly, you’ve been doing lots of first responding to students and across your organisation in the COVID crisis and many staff and students you’ve responded to have been an extremist and thirdly, the university is an ecosystem. The wellbeing of staff and students in inextricably interlinked. ADCET has done its own survey of your profession and its report from August 2020 speaks to staff’s continuing commitment and advocacy and support when often you are operating in exactly the same circumstances and difficulties as your students. This is a lovely quote which I think goes to the heart of the matter that you feel that your colleagues have been feeling overwhelmed in having to support everyone knowing that you have to look after your own mental health but not actually having the time or space to do so because you can’t let anyone down in the middle of a global crisis, so no pressure. We know that the already high level of mental health impacts will be exacerbated in the longer term by COVID and the already high prevalence rates across Australia and internationally will increase dramatically for generation COVID, so the black lines on this new slide are the usual Australian scores for young people and 25 plus people and you see how that has accelerated to high levels over the COVID period. This also matters because clearly there is no health without mental health. Work related psychological health and safety is a big work, health and safety issue especially when we spend a third of our time, our life, at work and nearly one in six Australian workers experience mental ill health. In higher education, higher education providers have regulatory responsibilities under the higher education standards framework to provide adequate mental health services for students and to provide and maintain an institutional environment in which the wellbeing of both staff and students is fostered. So much does this matter that in 2017 the Higher Education Standards Panel in its report on improving retention, completion and success recommended that every higher education provider should have a mental health strategy and implementation plan. Just last week the Productivity Commission released its mental health report and there is a similar recommendation about supporting the mental health of students and strengthening provider accountability and four actions were identified, first, that we continue to expand online mental health support for students, that we support international students in particular around their health cover and also their cultural diversity needs, also that all tertiary providers have a student mental health and wellbeing strategy and that guidance be produced for all providers. While the recommendations focus on students, staff and students are mentioned under Action 3 of this Recommendation 6. As a consequence of the Higher Education Standards Panel report recommendation Orygen was provided with funding to develop a mental health strategy. The framework that they have developed which is draft and must be due for delivery very shortly views mental health and wellbeing through a student lens but acknowledging that there is this interconnectedness in the university community and this is where I get to the apology part of the presentation because it’s mainly all academic or about academics for which I say sorry. So, here is a lovely piece in this next slide written about there being a perfect storm for academics in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment with a lovely framework that applies equally, I would suggest, to professional staff as it does to academics. It’s still mainly academic. In the UK a survey of 6000-odd academic staff about their satisfaction with senior managers and university governance, and their satisfaction was very low, identified a range of themes which I think resonate across all staff, the brutality of metrics, workload, accountability, constant change, vanity projects, the silenced academic and work in mental health. In Australia one of our colleagues from Deakin University has published a piece in the Higher Education Research and Development in which the abstract talks about the carelessness of government and university management for the wellbeing of international students and academics in the neoliberal context, but in the body of the article she does recognise the need to – she talks about the carelessness for the health and wellbeing of both academic and professional staff, so we are all in this together. A specific example of professional staff wellbeing appears in the Chronicle of Higher Education piece talking about technology enhanced learning advisors and saying that those staff are not okay. This piece says that while attention has been paid to the struggles of academics not much attention has been paid to that big pool of other staff who do the doing, who are expected to carry out whatever plans and then deal with the fallout. The comment is made about how professional staff are expending a lot of affective, with an “a”, labour and that this emotionally taxing work is difficult under normal circumstances and it has become overwhelming under COVID. This is how I frame my apology to you that disability and equity practitioners in this next slide are the Cinderellas of the higher education pandemic response. They’ve been hard-working, neglected, under-valued but not well understood but they’re continuing to enable and support those who may never have considered attending the Diversity and Equity Ball pre-pandemic. I mentioned the University UK Student Minds Charity. They have developed a university mental health charter identifying four domains, learn, support, live and work. The charter specifically acknowledges that the mental health of university staff is a growing area of focus acknowledging that academic staff have suffered negative impacts but identifying that there has been little work undertaken to investigate the mental health of professional and support staff. So, what are the stressors? Well, Safe Work Australia talks about stressors in a non-higher education context, more generally, under a range of categories such as job demands and control, organisational change, organisational justice and remote and isolated work. In Higher Education the Mental Health Charter talks about both academic and professional staff having similar stressors though differently experienced again around the demands and burdens and low levels of autonomy, lack of resources, insecurity, poor management, extrinsic pressures and this neoliberalism that has been mentioned and talking about the difficulties of supporting students experiencing poor mental health if staff are not adequately prepared and supported. This is the very interesting work in the UK by Liz Morrish. She did a Freedom of Information request to a large number of universities, 59 of which responded and it demonstrates the poor mental health for university staff over the seven year period from 2009 to 2016. The rises in counselling referrals are about 50% commonly over that period, some universities up to 316%, rises in occupational health referrals 424% at one university and professional staff account for 65% of the occupational health referrals on average. Hence, higher education is an anxiety machine. This work was updated in April 2020 pre-pandemic so we would expect it will become worse, again Freedom of Information requests extending the period and the average rise in staff accessing counselling has increased as has the rise in accessing occupational health assistance. I’m somewhat jealous on the next slide as you may have gathered of the quiet connected whole of institution and whole of sector approach in the UK. Universities UK developed a sector-wide approach called Stepchange in 2017 which was refreshed in 2020 following COVID and now has a self-assessment tool. The charter I have mentioned but there is other work out of the Student Minds Charity. There’s this wonderful piece of work about supporting academics to support students in their first responder role and JISC talks about digital wellbeing, the impact of technologies and digital services on everyone’s mental health. When I look at the Universities UK Stepchange work under the domain of work, so different from the Orygen piece that I took you to earlier, it talks about the need to engage staff in good mental health and how staff are supported in that regard so that they can support students and what resources there might be for that. Under the domain Support they talk about the need for staff and students to be more supported by a range of services and under the domain Live talk about making universities healthy settings, all of this to be enabled by all the things that you see constantly referred to in the literature around leadership, co-production, information, inclusivity, research and innovation. So, just taking you to a calm, grateful place, this is Jill Biden, the First Lady Elect, it’s Dr Jill Biden. Jill has a doctorate in education and moreover the subject of her doctorate is on student retention in community college talking about student needs, academic, psychological, social and physical. As the President Elect said in his acceptance speech, “Jill Biden is an educator. It’s not just what she does, it’s who she is. This is a great day for education. You’re going to have one of your own in the White House, happy days.” You have fabulous colleagues doing fabulous work across the sector, three of whom I know are going to present straight after me on their work done with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. You also have this marvellous project after the next presentation on reimagining exams, so looking at are reasonable adjustments equitable for students and how do we shift our understanding about the barriers and enablers for inclusive assessment, this critical work. In advertising for student participation the leaders got overwhelmed by the student interest. 150 I think responded in the first 48 hours, so big work there. What’s to be done more broadly? This is a fork in the road of what I did there. Again with a huge disclaimer, this is not my space, but I do understand that there are aspects around healthy living, understanding your stressors, being kind to yourself, practising gratitude, relaxation and fun and then this marvellous piece of work from the University of Melbourne around enhancing student wellbeing also talks about the psychological skills for your academic role. Again, the sorts of things we would suggest to our students are around self regulation, self awareness, good boundaries, good help seeking skills, good work/life balance, resilience and practising the acronym CARE, C for connectedness, A for awareness, R for resources, E for effectiveness. The Student Mental Health Charter also talks about principles for supporting, under the domain of Work particularly looking after staff wellbeing through culture, interventions and support and also addressing staff development, a critical piece around training and development on mental health roles, specific training and the clarifying of boundaries, ongoing development, critically training managers to support staff to support students and training managers to support good wellbeing in their teams and to respond appropriately. In the piece of work that ADCET did the number of challenges that were identified there along the lines that other studies have shown around wellbeing and workplace and communication there are some specific strategies included in this report, and I recommend it to you, how to overcome some of these challenges, for example, by enhanced training, so sharing good working from home practices, doing that regular check-in with teams, managing wellbeing, professional development for what technology works best and the helpful training that is available. Challenges could be addressed through policies and strategies particularly around flexibility for assessment and inclusive pedagogy, universal design for learning, training academics, and I know one of the following speakers will speak about this, so that academics are aware of student challenges and consider the diversity of learners in their rapid responses, universal design for learning, and what better processes might be available to proactively support students, so some good tips there. Critically also this idea that there have been silver linings that have come out of COVID for our sector, the breaking down of some longstanding barriers and a shift towards inclusive teaching and universal design. The suggestion is that there be a forum where we try to harness and leverage that good work. The next slide, so that when everyone sits around the curriculum redesign table disability, and equity practitioners in particular, that we can leverage the good work and advances that have happened. There is this big equity vision in this next slide for student equity 2030. That’s an energising piece of work. There is an array of resources that have come out of COVID, ADCET podcasts and ADCET webinars I have exampled on this next slide and this idea that we need to be quite kind to ourselves in the panic-gogy that we have enacted and that when you’ve done your disability and equity work this horse meme of start of the year with a perfectly formed drawing and then how that deteriorates over the course of the rapid response to a stick leg for actual support and delivery, but you have done an amazing job over this period and we thank you for it. There are other great resources across the sector, this resource in this next slide from colleagues at Victoria University and a lot of resources identified in this next slide, the general resources, but also the higher education specific resources. So I say thank you. This is my thank you happy dance and if we do have a moment Darlene I was going to take you, and I’ve been practising, to this wonderful little short video, less than 30 seconds, if I might audio describe it first. It is a keyboard player playing Eternal Flame by the Bangles in the midst of a protest, so let me see if I can get that up for you. I think it shows how you’ve responded calmly and respectfully in the context of chaos.

DARLENE: Hi, Sally, it’s Darlene. We’re not hearing the sound, worse luck, after all your practices. Do you want to have another go?

SALLY KIFT: No, I’ll leave it, thank you, Darlene.

DARLENE: Try one more time.

SALLY KIFT: What happened, you couldn’t hear it?

DARLENE: We couldn’t hear it all so you just need to when you share your screen click that little button.

SALLY KIFT: I had already done that but let me try again.

DARLENE: Don’t worry, there are gremlins in the system today.

SALLY KIFT: I’ll share it again. Oh, now we’ve gone on to something new.

DARLENE: That could be boring.

SALLY KIFT: Could well be. I won’t worry, thank you.

DARLENE: Okay, you’re fine? Thank you so much, Sally. That was absolutely brilliant mainly because you kept giving a plug for ADCET which was great but I may be biased. It is fantastic to be reminded that it is really important that we do take care of ourselves and take care of our colleagues in such difficult and challenging times that we’ve had in 2020 and it’s fantastic to be able to take stock of that. Thank you. Any questions? We’ve got probably a minute or so for a question or two if anybody wanted to ask anything. “We’ve got a few great insights, thanks, Sally.” “Thank you, Sally, that was a great session.” There’s a little bit of activity on Twitter as well, Sally, which is fantastic. I was trying to kind of screen capture some of your presentations and I’m just never quick enough. Emma has actually shared the YouTube link in the chat, so people can watch that in their own time because it is a fantastic image and, as you said, it kind of reflects on the year we’ve had. Thank you, Sally.