

# Supporting tertiary students with disabilities, mental illness and long term health conditions: Student and staff perspectives of what works

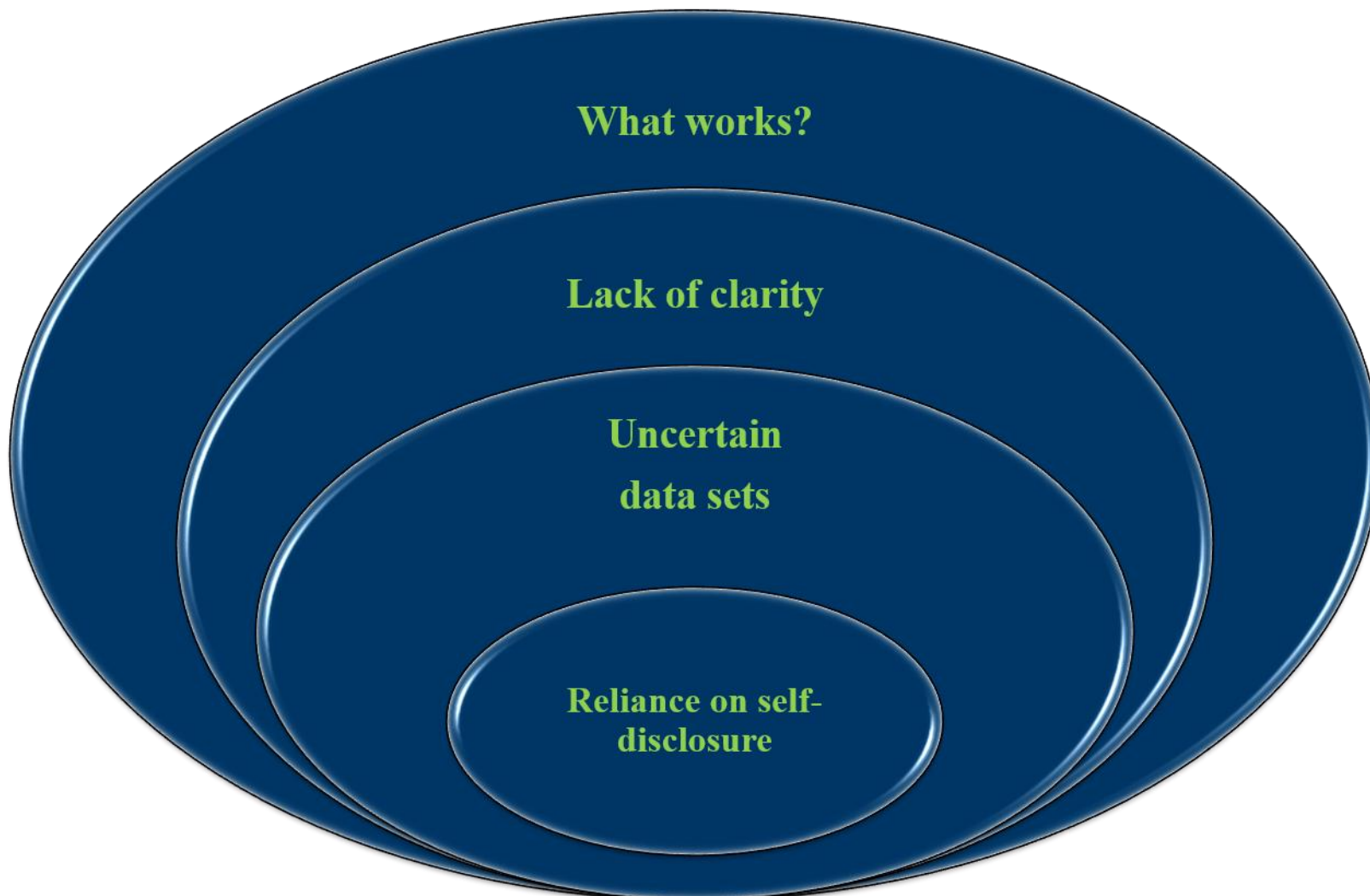
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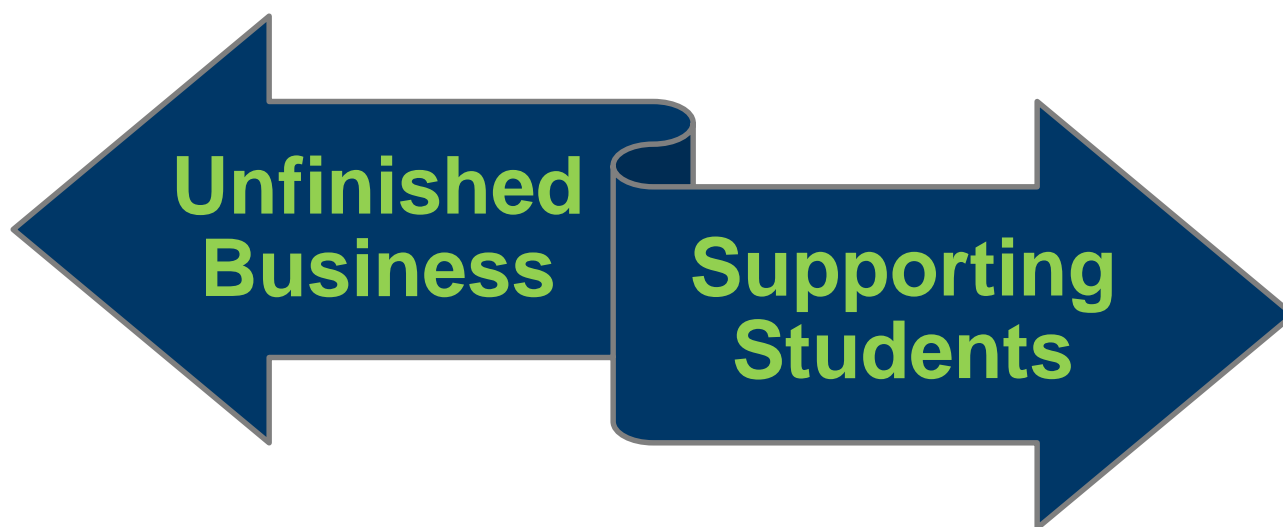
Professor Ellie Fossey, Monash University & La Trobe University

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# Current thinking about supporting students



# Our Research



**Mental illness**

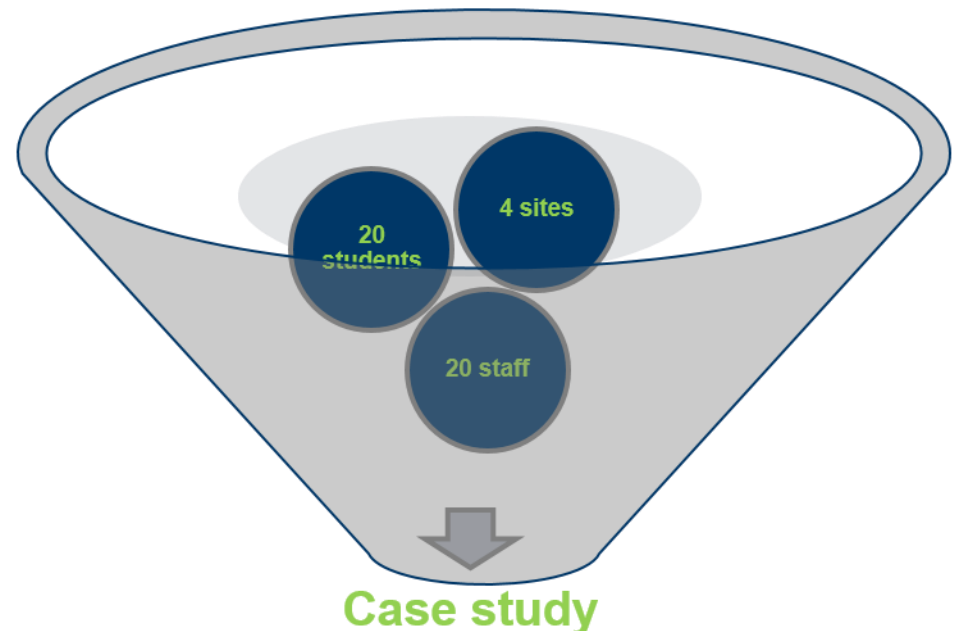
**Disability**



# Unfinished business: student perspectives on disclosure of mental illness and success in VET

## Research Aim and Method

To improve understanding of the factors influencing successful course completion for VET students with a mental illness from the perspectives of the students themselves.



# Factors for course success- student and staff perspectives



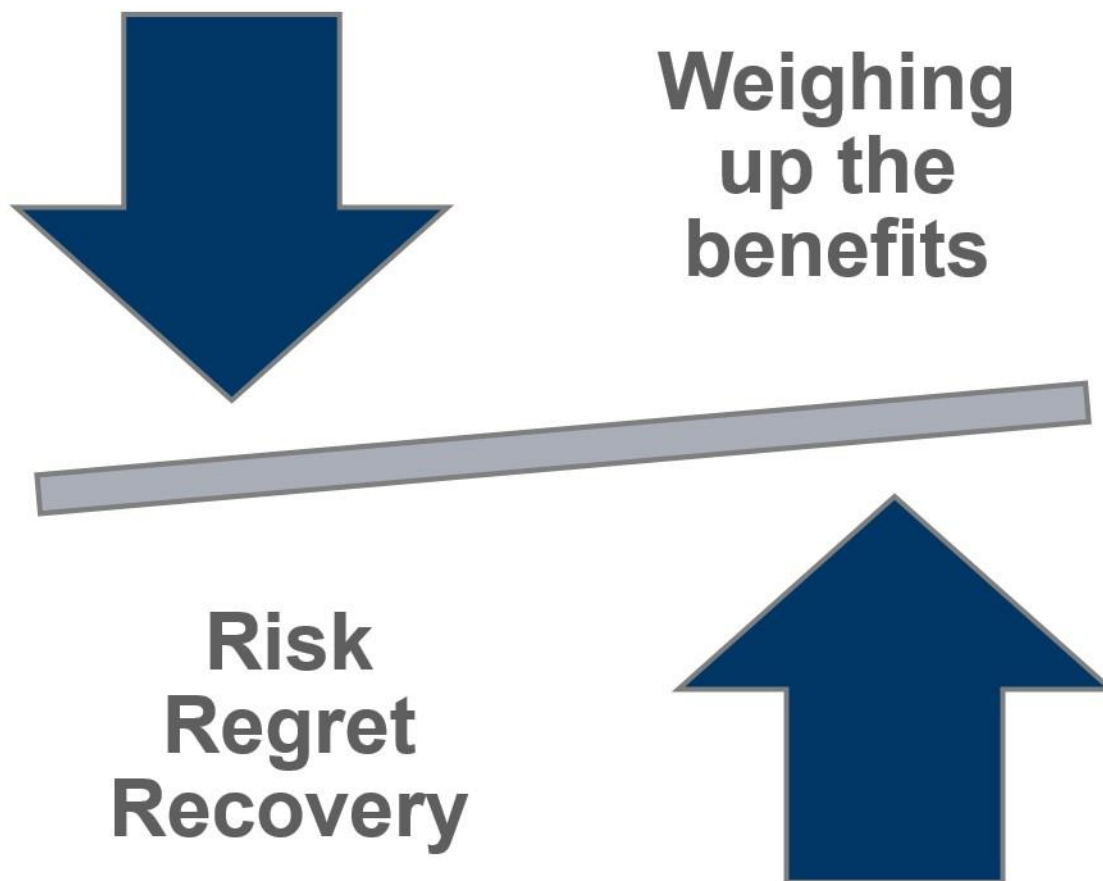
# Disclosure of Mental Illness as the Start Button

- Support mechanisms are predicated on disclosure
- Previous research has focused on ways to increase rates of disclosure
- But.....

students have different understandings of disclosure  
than do staff and organisations



## The Disclosure Dilemma



## The presentation of a better self: student perspectives

*Well if I, ah... say talk openly with my teachers about depression, or anything like that, you know, because they are in the industry I just fear that you know they...if one day they are to interview me for a job and you know... or to take part in a project, they will think, 'Oh A, that' s the guy who was depressed... you know, he didn' t cope with his previous job, so he quit' ... I just fear that kind of information, you know might escape, I know that this depression I' m going through is just a phase and not something that is going to last forever so, umm, I just want to keep it to myself ... I just don' t want to be perceived as depressed, as a depressed person, a sad person, you know (Alain Site 1)*





## **“The right thing to do”: staff perspectives**

- Student disclosure was seen as a means of opening the way for access to support services.
  - Despite staff participants expecting students to disclose, they expressed an unwillingness to risk the social stigma potentially created by disclosure of mental illness for themselves.
- Moll, Eakin, Franche, and Strike (2013) hypothesise that staff disclosure decisions are unconsciously embedded in and “shaped by an institutional discourse on what it means to be a ‘good worker’” (p. 175) and so conceal signs of illness.
  - Student disclosure decisions reflect a parallel process



## VET Context & disclosure



# Supporting tertiary students experiencing disability and/or ongoing health conditions

## Research aims

To better understand the range of supports offered to students experiencing disability or health conditions disabilities, how these supports are implemented , and their usefulness to students' learning from three viewpoints:

- Tertiary students experiencing disability or health conditions enrolled in a VET or university course
- Staff providing disability support to VET and university students
- Curriculum / course leaders

## Methods

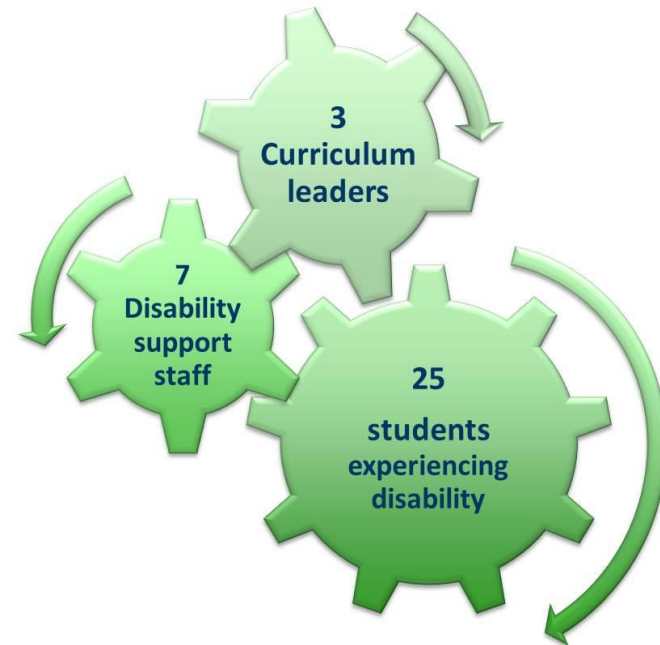
- Guided by a reference group with expertise in VET and university student support and disability services
- Qualitative interviewing



## **Tertiary students, teaching and disability support staff interviews - differing but interconnecting issues & viewpoints on:**

**1) Provision of individualised reasonable adjustments**

**2) Use of institution-level learning supports**



**2 sites**

# Student learning supports

## Reasonable adjustments - individualised

Available to eligible students experiencing disability / health condition who register with VET provider's disability service

An individualised modification to the learning environment, certification requirements, training delivery or assessment method

- put in place to reduce the impacts of registered student's disability/health condition on studying

**Purpose:** To enable the student experiencing disability or ongoing health condition to access and participate in education or training on an equal footing with other students, in accordance with Australia's Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and Disability Standards for Education (2005)

- NOT to advantage students with disabilities above other students, to guarantee success, to alter course standards, outcomes, or integrity

## Institution-level learning supports

Available to all students enrolled at a VET institution to make use of

Learning supports provided by a VET provider, such as study skills, library and technical skills support

- put in place to support student skills development and enhance their learning experiences

May be accessed without necessitating disclosure of disability or a health condition

## Main findings

Supporting tertiary students with disabilities is complex in practice:

- It involves not only identifying their learning support needs, but also negotiating and implementing learning supports
- Multiple people need to be engaged in these processes: students, teachers & disability staff.

Many types of individualised reasonable adjustments are used by students, reflecting:

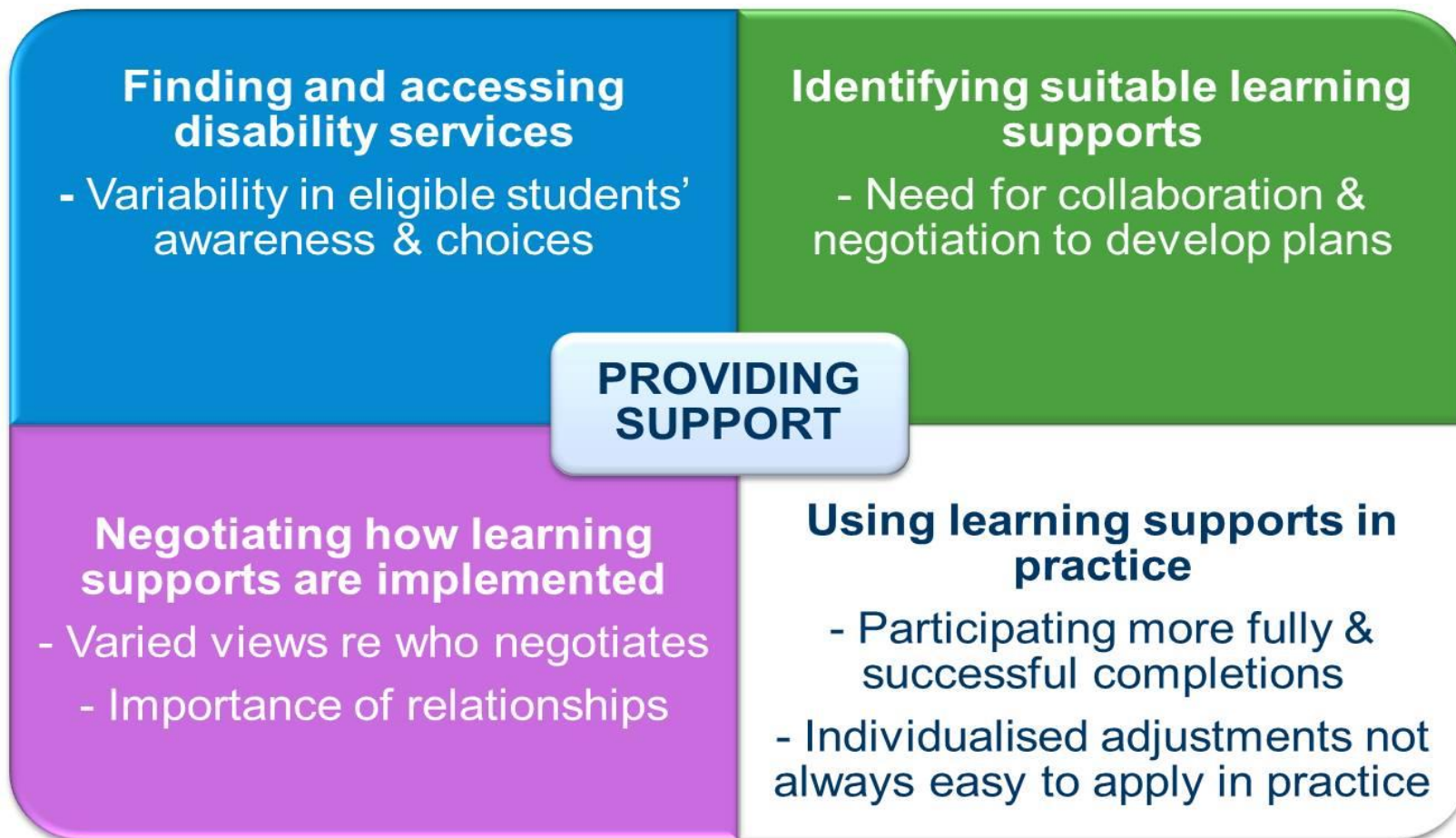
- Diversity in students' learning support needs
- Specific learning tasks, assessments and learning environments, for which the adjustments are intended.

Institution-level learning supports identified as useful for supporting these students' learning were particularly those involving the use of information and communication technologies, and inclusive teaching practices

Learning supports for students with disabilities could be enhanced through more active use of institution-level learning supports, as well as individualised reasonable adjustments.



## Provision of disability supports: 4 processes





## Good practice - WHAT kind of supports to offer my students?

- Decisions about what supports/adjustments to offer should focus on the individual student's needs
  - Consult with the student, teachers/instructors, support people and/or technical experts to:
    - identify learning and/or assessment tasks for which supports/adjustments are needed
    - consider available options - students' own strategies, learning supports available to all students, and reasonable adjustments
  - Collaboration is key in selecting what supports / adjustments are appropriate, how best to implement them, and whether they are working





## Reasonable adjustments – some examples

### **Flexibility in assessments**

- Extended assessment due dates and/or changed assessment formats (eg, oral instead of written presentation) and submission methods (eg electronic instead of in person)

### **Changed assessment conditions**

- Provision of a computer / recorder rather than hand writing / use of scribe
- Allowance of food and beverages, extended exam time and/or location in a quiet room

**Provision of appropriate adaptive equipment** (eg screen reader, audio recorder, adjustable seating, specialist software)

### **In-class support**

- Making study materials and recordings of classes available online for more flexible access & review
- Note takers (who may sit with the student or separately depending on student's preference)
- Participation support
- Re-formatting of course materials to accommodate specific impairments (e.g., large print, audio-recording)

### **Other academic support**

- Course information provided in varied formats (e.g., printed, online, audio-books)
- Individual tutoring or study skills development
- Regular monitoring, encouragement and seeking feedback



## Other learning supports to consider – some examples

### **Institution-level learning supports, eg**

#### **Flexibility in learning activities or assessment formats**

##### **In-class support, eg**

- Teaching stress management & coping strategies in class
- Making class materials available online
- Providing 'revision' classes to supplement regular teaching sessions

##### **Other academic support, eg**

- Course information in varied formats (e.g., print & online)
- Teachers being accessible (e.g., 'open-door policy', strategies to address accessibility when many staff are part-time/casual)

### **Student initiated strategies, eg**

Using non-specialist equipment (eg, wheeled bags for carrying books)

Using mobile devices to organise their schedules, develop study skills, or record, watch and listen to lessons

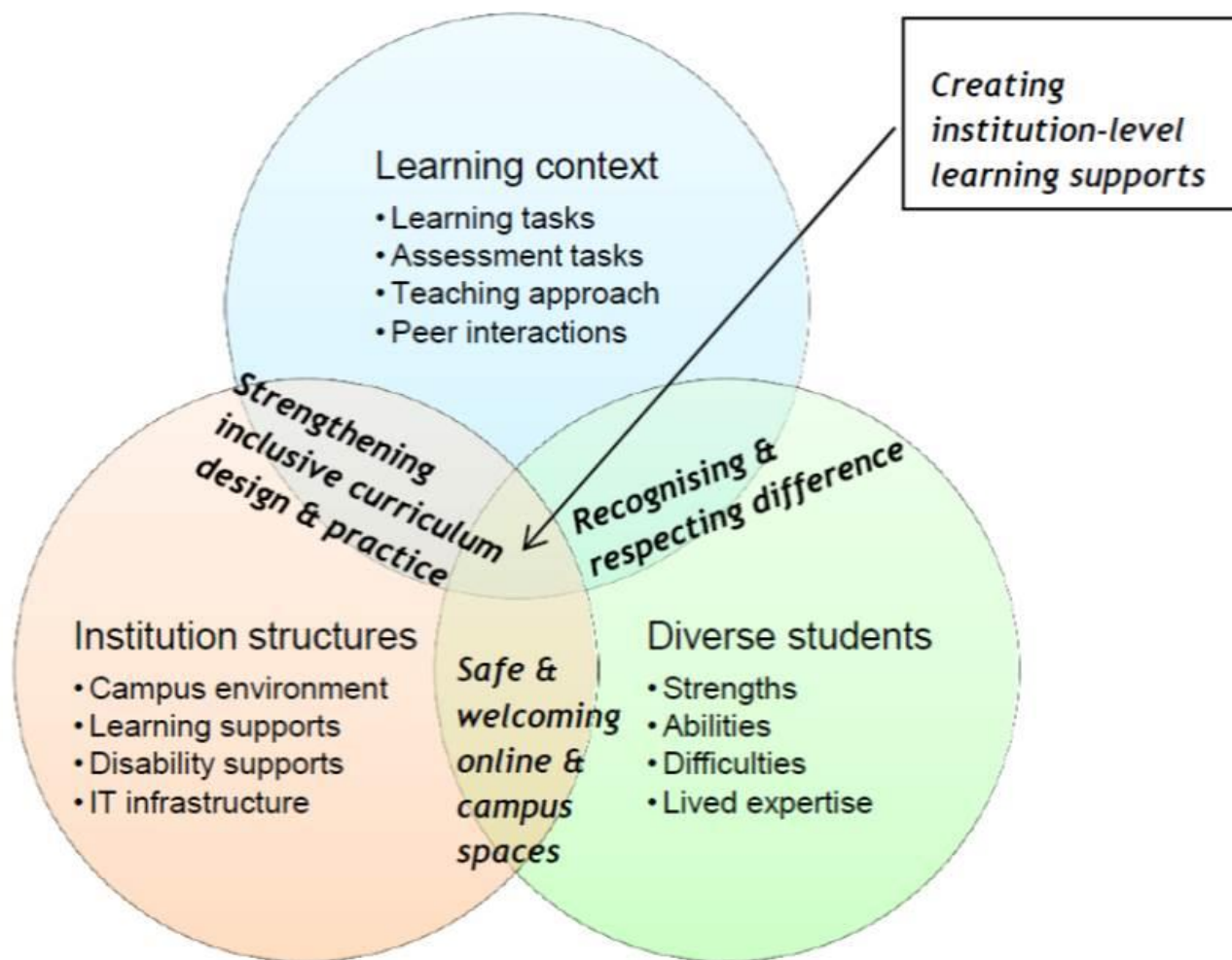
Searching online for information resources/tools to assist with their studies

Listening to audiobooks instead of printed books, where available

Reducing study loads by studying part-time

Using stress management strategies





## Further resources

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