

Supporting students' wellbeing during COVID-19: tips from regional & remote Australia

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NCSEHE

National Centre for Student
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University

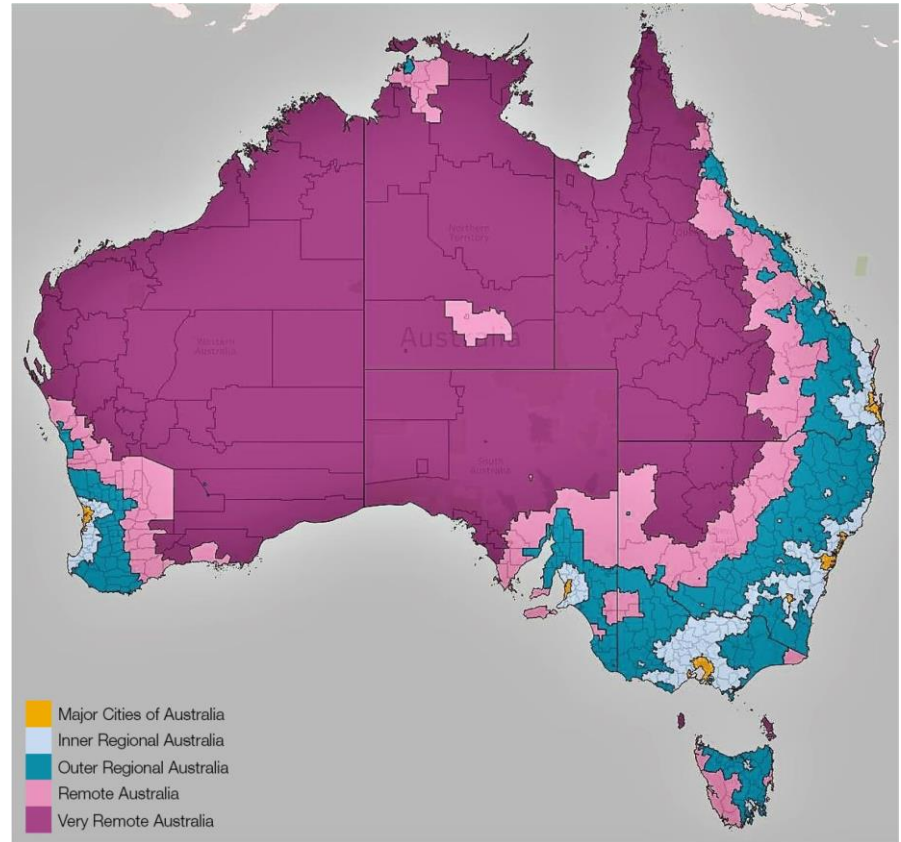


**UNIVERSITY of
TASMANIA**

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2019/20 Equity Fellowship: Research topic

Investigating proactive approaches to supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students from/in regional and remote Australia



(Regional Education Expert Advisory Group 2019, p. 88.)

Significant issues underpin the topic

- Student mental health and wellbeing is of national (and international) concern
- Regional and remote students are in the national spotlight
- Why mature-aged students from regional and remote areas?
 - Attention is often paid to school leavers
 - Responding to calls for deeper understanding of the diversity and complexity of equity-group cohorts
 - Potential positive influence of mature-aged students on their families, peers, communities in regional and remote Australia

Current context: university student mental health

- Recent reports/projects in Australia
 - Baik et al. (2016, 2017)
 - Orygen (2017)
 - Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP), 2018 – Recommendation 8
- International blueprints/approaches/frameworks
 - Healthy Universities UK
 - Okanagan Charter (2015)

[Holistic, institution-wide, settings approaches!]

Mental wellbeing

For the purpose of this presentation, we'll understand 'mental wellbeing' as being able to: manage 'normal' stresses of uni and life, be productive, fulfilled, have a meaningful life... (adapted from the WHO)

How?

- Have the resources to meet the challenges
- Have the following needs met:
 - Agency / autonomy
 - Belonging / relatedness / connections
 - Growth / competence
 - Purpose

Mixed methods

1. Department of Education, Skills and Employment data request
2. Student Survey (n=2,401) administered at universities around Australia
3. Student Interviews (n=51): in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one

Student survey

Statement:

I have at least one person (staff or student) who I can turn to at university for support.

31.1% disagree/strongly disagree

On-line students more likely to disagree/strongly disagree ($p < 0.001$) with this statement.

Student survey

Statement:

I have a supportive peer group (f2f or online) at university.

46.7% disagree/strongly disagree

Students who study online are more likely to disagree/ strongly disagree ($p < 0.001$).

Student survey

47.7% considered deferring or withdrawing from their course.

- A greater proportion of students who considered dropping out studied online.
- Students who found the teaching environment (f2f or online) stressful were more likely to consider deferring.
- Students who felt included in the teaching environment were more likely to NOT consider withdrawing.
- Students who agreed/strongly agreed they had social connections in their course were less likely to consider deferring.



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Top 5 reasons why students considered withdrawing/deferring

1. Stress (579 respondents)
2. Feeling overwhelmed by my university study load (489)
3. Mental health difficulties (387)
4. I couldn't fit study in with my other commitments (380)
5. Financial difficulties (299)

Open-ended survey question

What can universities do better to support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged uni students from regional and remote Australia?

- Codes/themes/categories were overwhelmingly about the students' teaching and learning experiences

What can we learn from mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia?

1. Know students' needs: understand their diverse circumstances
2. Be aware of practical challenges: e.g. bandwidth
3. Facilitate student connections
4. Provide opportunities for Q&As
5. Check in with students: online learning can be lonely and isolating
6. Promote your university's student services (e.g. Counselling)
7. Your impact is enormous: it's the small (human) actions that count



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[My study] is a tiny desk in their playroom. And I've got just a little swivel chair and a tiny little desk, and stuff cluttered around everywhere. Often I'm listening to a lecture with the kids climbing on top of me... so concentration can be harder. Sometimes I bring my laptop out and I'll listen to lectures while I'm doing the dishes, or while I'm cooking dinner. Yeah, it's tricky.

1. Know students' needs: understand their diverse circumstances

Take an inclusive approach to your course content, delivery and LMS tools; think about:

- Who is it including? Who is it excluding?
- For example, if you're offering synchronous sessions, not all students will be available at the scheduled time. Provide material asynchronously too.
- Accommodate all students [Follow Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles: multiple means of representation, engagement & expression]

*[The Internet] does drop out, and we do lose connectivity...
afternoons are worse... And, it's also impossible to watch a lecture
when there's no download.*

2. Be aware of practical challenges: e.g. bandwidth

- Keep your technology simple.
- Ensure that lecture recordings and other materials are downloadable, not just stream-able.

The ability to actually talk with other students face to face about an assignment and how they're approaching it and how they've interpreted a question and all that; that's priceless.

And just encouragement, too. I think having someone there on Facebook that you can just message and go, "You know, I've had a rough time with this," or, "You know, this assignment's been really difficult." Yeah, you've sort of got someone else who can relate to you.

3. Facilitate student connections

- Provide opportunities on your LMS for students to communicate synchronously (e.g. Collaborate/Skype/Zoom meetings) and asynchronously (e.g. Discussion boards).
- Take a few minutes at the beginning or end of synchronous sessions for some lighter/informal communication.
- Ask questions on the Discussion boards that encourage students to share something (e.g. an interest/hobby) about them.
- A lot of online students use closed Facebook groups as an online forum for students in their unit/course.

One of the biggest things that holds you up on assignments is that you've got a question and you post the question to the forum, and you have a look and it hasn't been answered, or you don't really understand it still, and sometimes it can take a while to get a response.

4. Provide opportunities for Q&As

- Dedicate a regular Collaborate/Skype/Zoom meeting for Q&As.
- You could shift your student consultation times to an online meeting.
- Just because a lot of students aren't responding to your discussion posts doesn't mean they aren't reading them and benefiting from them.
- Provide students with clear expectations about your response times for emails and discussion posts.

Have someone that can check in with the student from time to time - a simple call to see how they are progressing or if they need any help. Speaking from experience I won't ask for help I will tackle everything on my own, which normally means I end up stressed. Some people are too embarrassed to ask for help.

5. Check in with students: online learning can be lonely and isolating

- Be approachable and proactive in supporting students.
- Check in with students semi-regularly in a personalised way via email.
- Depending on your staff-to-student ratio, you could check in via phone.
- Alternatively, a short (2 minute) video is a way to check in with large numbers of students, and for them to see you.

Reminders that support services are available and there is no harm in using them.

I think the more separated you are, the less likely you are to know of what you can do or things you can access.

6. Promote your university's services

- Draw your students' attention to your university's student services.
- These services will also be reorienting their practice to deliver appointments and workshops online.
- You could send reminders a few times per semester and in different ways: e.g. email newsletter, discussion/announcement on the LMS, at the beginning or end of a class.

The lecturer sent me an email as he noticed I had dropped the subject and was checking in to see why. I explained that I dropped due to personal stressors. He replied empathetically and wished me well. He didn't have to check in... it was meaningful to me at the time.

7. Your impact is enormous: it's the small (human) actions that count

Don't forget the impact of your actions – it's the little, kind, human things that really matter!

A few more thoughts about our current environment ...

- These are extraordinary times; moving online at such speed is stressful and a major upheaval for you; it will be for your students too.
- Reassess your expectations of yourself and your students.
- Pastoral care / support roles will be even more important right now.
- Tips for students on time management and managing distractions might be beneficial.

Support/enhance staff mental wellbeing

1. Importance of community – a community of care; How can you foster it?
2. Debriefing with trusted colleagues
3. Bearing witness to students' transformations
4. Coping strategies and self care

(For suggestions, see: Crawford et al. 2019; Crawford et al. 2018; Olds et al. 2018.)

To sum up ...

1. Do what you can, but, first and foremost, look after yourself and each other.
2. Keep it simple; be clear, consistent and offer flexibility.
3. Don't forget to draw on the expertise and support of Ed. Tech. colleagues, counselling staff, disability advisors, academic learning advisors etc.
4. In this historic moment, we can learn a lot from the experiences of 'equity' students, such as students in regional and remote Australia.

Webinars 1 & 2: three key messages

1. Get to know your students (e.g. their diverse needs, challenges, circumstances, strengths)
2. Facilitate connections and communication
3. Promote your university's support services

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Thank you

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