"ON THE RADAR": SUPPORTING THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF MATURE-AGED STUDENTS IN REGIONAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA
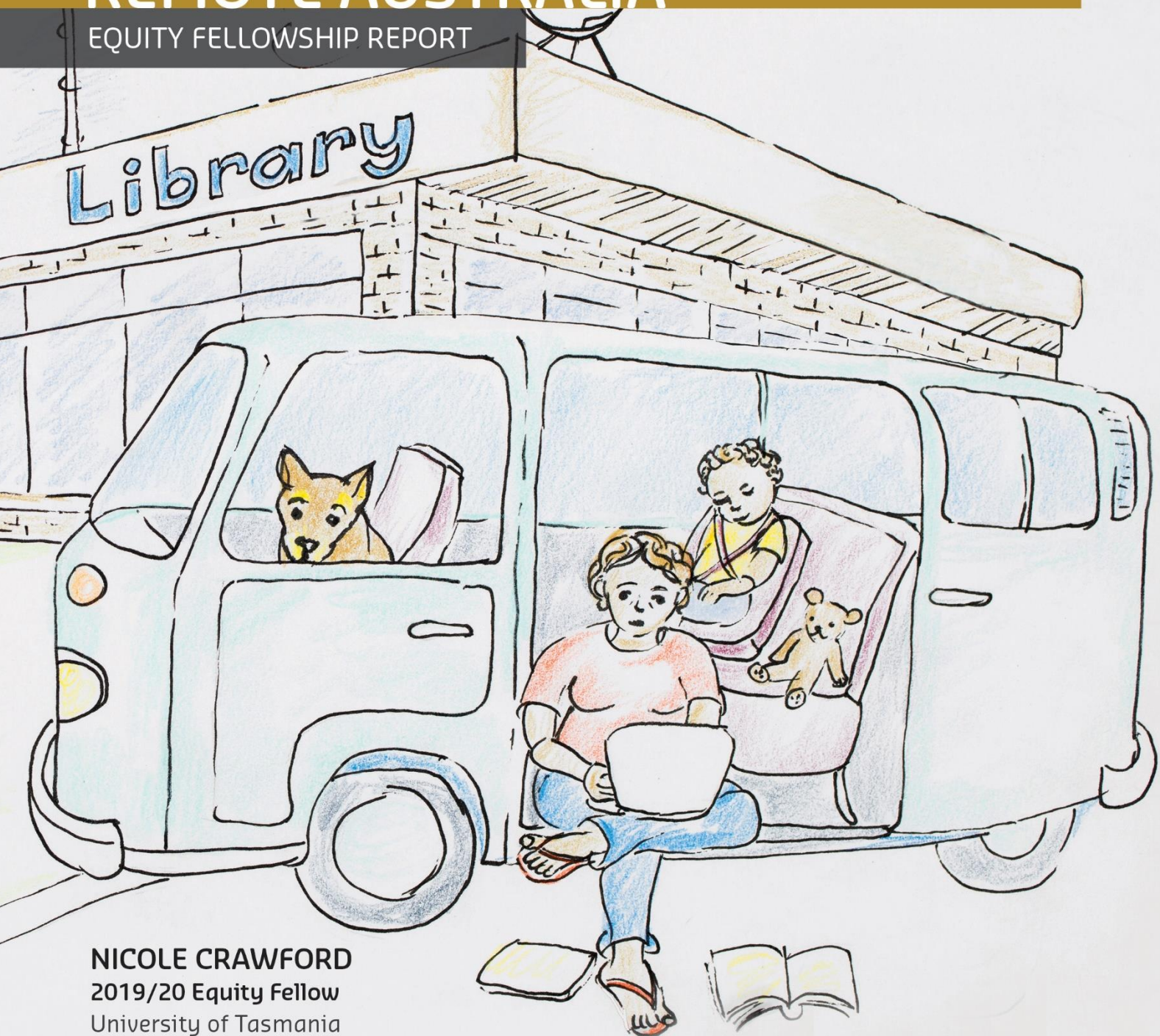
EQUITY FELLOWSHIP REPORT

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"On the radar": Supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia

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April 2021

Cover image: Kombi by Morag Porteous

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Thank you to my wonderful family and friends for support during this Fellowship. Finally, I dedicate this work to the life and memory of Andrew Hauserman, 1966-2016.

Nicole Crawford
Launceston, Tasmania
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List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ASGS	Australian Statistical Geography Standard
DESE	Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment
FiF	First-in-Family
LMS	Learning Management System
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
NESB	Non-English speaking background
QILT	Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching
RQ	Research question
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
SES	Socioeconomic status
UK	United Kingdom
UTAS	University of Tasmania
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Background

University students' mental wellbeing is increasingly "on the radar" of universities in Australia and internationally. In this climate, this one-year 2019/20 NCSEHE Equity Fellowship research investigated university students' perspectives on mental wellbeing and their insights into proactive approaches that they found supportive during their university studies. In particular, the research focused on mature-aged students who live in, or come from, regional and remote areas in Australia. Regional and remote students are in the national spotlight as attested by recent national reports. However, the focus of improving access and participation in higher education has been on school leavers. Mature-aged students are largely missing from the discussion, yet they make up a sizeable proportion of the regional and remote cohort. In focusing on the mature-aged sub-group within the regional and remote cohort, this project responded to calls for deeper understanding of the diversity and complexity of equity group cohorts, as well as the need to understand more about how universities can proactively support students' mental wellbeing.

Research approach and methods

This Fellowship research investigated two overarching research questions: i) "What factors impact on the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?"; and ii) "What are proactive approaches that support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students in, and from, regional and remote in Australia?" The sub-research question, "who are mature-aged university students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?" was a necessary starting point for approaching the two overarching questions.

This research followed a concurrent transformative mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014). It was informed by multiple conceptualisations of mental wellbeing (detailed in Section 2.2.1. of the Report). In brief, adapting the WHO's (2014) definition, mental wellbeing was understood as managing the "normal" stresses of university and life in order to thrive and reach one's academic goals and potential. The research also drew on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to demonstrate that students are located within multiple interacting microsystems (for example: university, family, work and local community) that impact positively and negatively on their mental wellbeing, and which are also influenced by other layers of the broader ecosystem. Three methods of data collection (detailed in Section 3) were employed: i) national higher education student data (specifically, the 2018 Domestic Undergraduate Participation data); ii) a student survey; and iii) student interviews. Descriptive statistical analyses of the national student data and the quantitative survey data were undertaken. Specific questions in the latter were investigated for associations between variables using cross tabulations and tested for significant differences using Chi-square tests. The $p<0.05$ significance level was used for all tests. The open-ended survey questions and the interview data were analysed qualitatively.

The approximately 1,800 survey participants and 51 interviewees were from regional and remote areas all over Australia, in all states and territories; they studied in a range of fields and were spread across the year levels. The majority of participants were from 15 universities.

Key findings

In response to the research questions, findings are detailed in Sections 4, 5 and 6 in the Report and summarised here.

Who are mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?

Notable patterns in the regional and remote student cohort were found from an analysis of the national higher education student data. The more remote the geographical location, the higher the proportion of students who were female, studying online and studying part-time. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students increased with remoteness. The proportion of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) areas was far higher for the regional and remote locations compared to the metropolitan areas. All of these patterns were even more pronounced for older students: that is, for students who were aged 21 or older at the commencement of their degree.

The majority of survey respondents (82.0%) remained in their regional/remote location for their university studies; 41.1 per cent of the respondents had children under 18 years of age living at home, and 81.3 per cent of respondents were in paid employment. Further statistical analysis of the survey data revealed that the students who studied online were more likely to study part-time, work full-time, and live in outer regional, remote and very remote areas; in addition, the students who were the first in their family to attend university were more likely to study online.

Mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia were found to be a diverse cohort with varying circumstances. Large numbers of the survey and interview respondents undertook their studies fully online in their regional or remote locations. Smaller numbers relocated from regional or remote areas to major cities, but with the intention of returning home upon completion of their studies. Many students had busy lives balancing their studies with parenting, work and community responsibilities. These students, typically women, carved out the space and time for study in snippets between their other commitments. Other students were less time poor and studying was "their time". Some of these students found that study helped them in their recovery from or management of major life events or situations, such as divorce, retirement and, in some cases, homelessness, or physical or mental ill-health (including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder).

What impacts on the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?

A variety of factors impacted on students' mental wellbeing, both within the context of their daily learning and interactions with their university course, curriculum, peers and staff, and outside of the university environment, such as practical issues (for example, unreliable internet) and financial challenges. Several aspects of the students' learning experiences were revealed in the qualitative analyses and highlight the importance of teaching and learning for student mental wellbeing. Mature-aged students in certain sub-groups within the regional and remote cohort—such as students who studied online and part-time, and students with children—experienced compounding challenges and impacts.

Almost half of the survey respondents (47.7%) considered deferring/withdrawing from their university course. The top two reasons why students considered deferring/withdrawing were: i) stress (65.6%); and ii) feeling overwhelmed by their university study-load (55.4%).

The survey responses to a series of statements that focused on the different periods within the cycle of a semester highlighted the temporal nature of stress with some periods of time within a semester being more stressful than others. Unsurprisingly, the most stressful periods were the time just before assignments were due and the final weeks of semester.

School holiday periods were a stressful time for a large minority of students, as were the pre-semester/orientation periods and the first week of semester.

How do students support their mental wellbeing?

While more than half of the respondents (54.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had at least one person (staff member or student) they could turn to at university for support, of concern is that nearly one third (31.1%) of the respondents did not. Also of concern is that 46.7 per cent of respondents reported not having a supportive peer group (whether it be face-to-face or online) at university. The finer-grained analysis found that specific sub-groups of students (that is, students who studied online or part-time or were aged 31-40) not only had no one to turn to for support at university, but they were also likely not to have support with their university studies from people close to them outside of university; for example, they were more likely to report that their family and friends had a negative or extremely negative impact on their mental wellbeing.

There is a discrepancy between universities' provision of Student Support Services and students' awareness of them. The quantitative analysis of the survey results revealed a lack of awareness of wellbeing/health events and online resources on university websites about mental health and wellbeing. On a more positive note, 72.4 per cent of survey respondents were aware that they could access counselling services at university. Comments from some interviewees highlighted that they were unaware of their university's Student Support Services until they needed them and were introduced to them by a staff member, such as a lecturer, tutor or librarian. It illustrates the importance of small actions by staff, which ultimately assisted these students in seeking support from their university's Student Support Services.

The majority of students in this study indicated that they knew how to look after their mental wellbeing. However, students reported that it was not always possible to implement self-care and other "healthy" strategies whilst juggling multiple commitments. For many students in this study, there was a mismatch between the academic demands and the time that students had available to meet them, along with other commitments vital to maintaining their general health, their families and their finances.

Discussion points

The discussion considered the complexity of the lives of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia and how it impacted on their mental wellbeing by applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. It explored the research participants' experiences of juggling multiple roles and the theme of feeling invisible, ignored and unrecognised. The discussion also engaged with the question of what can be done better to support student mental wellbeing and revealed the importance of inclusive practices in teaching and learning, and student support. The following discussion points are explored in Section 7:

1. The complexity of students' mental wellbeing.
2. "The juggling act": microsystem impacts on mental wellbeing.
3. Under-provisioned and dealing with exosystem impacts.
4. Feeling invisible and unrecognised: macrosystem impacts.
5. The importance of inclusive practices.
6. The impact on staff mental wellbeing.[1]

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1 The mental wellbeing of academic and professional staff needs to be considered alongside the role that they play in supporting students' mental wellbeing.

Recommendations for universities and government

The following set of recommendations (which are detailed in Section 8 of the Report) are informed by the research findings and the discussion points. The recommendations offer guidance for universities to better support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas. Furthermore, if adopted, they will benefit *all* students.

1. Know who your students are and respond to student diversity.
2. Value and acknowledge students' strengths and experiences.
3. Support and resource academic and professional staff to implement inclusive pedagogies and practices.
4. Apply an equity lens to rules and regulations.
5. Consider students' access to technology and the internet.
6. Expand access to physical study facilities.
7. Provide financial support.

While these recommendations are targeted towards universities, recommendations 3, 5, 6 and 7, in particular, are also relevant to the Government's higher education policy.

Guidelines for proactively supporting student mental wellbeing

The recommendations listed above apply to the broader university culture, expectations and its systems. The guidelines presented here (and detailed in Section 9 of the Report) are a response to a major theme in this research — the importance of the teaching and learning experience; that is, students' everyday interactions with the curriculum, staff and peers, and the learning environment. Informed by the research findings and discussion in the Report, the guidelines are particularly relevant for academic and professional staff.

1. Know your students: understand their diverse challenges, commitments and strengths.
2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring.
3. Embed universal design for learning (UDL) principles in curriculum design, and delivery.
4. Consider students' online environment in course and curriculum design, and delivery.
5. Facilitate student interactions and connections.
6. Provide pre-university transition or preparation courses and specific orientation events.
7. Consider students' practical challenges: assessment deadlines, timetabling, placements, internet access and natural disasters.
8. Raise awareness of the full range of university services that support students.
9. Ensure Student Support Services are responsive to student diversity and inclusive of all students.

Conclusion

Taking an ecosystem perspective, this research highlights the myriad and complex ways that students' mental wellbeing is impacted by the many interactions between their multiple roles—at home, at work, in their community and at university—and in larger contexts, in which factors, such as the culture of an institution, may impinge on or support and enhance students' mental wellbeing. The research findings suggest that entrenched attitudes and expectations that favour and privilege some students (for example, younger students with time and who study on-campus) over others (for example, older students who juggle numerous commitments, and study online and part-time) continue to prevail. Challenges with course content or delivery, and with university rules and regulations, which were found to be

unconsciously designed for so-called "ideal", "implied" and "traditional"[2] students, exacerbated the already challenging situations experienced by students who did not fit this profile, such as mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas. Inclusive practices in teaching, learning and support offer ways of catering for the needs and strengths of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia and of proactively supporting and enhancing their mental wellbeing. Increased attention to these aspects could improve students' experiences and, as a consequence, their learning and academic achievement, and improve retention and success rates for universities.

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[2] The terms "traditional" and "non-traditional" are used in the Report with caution, noting that they are contested and problematic, and defined variously. However, they serve a purpose, as even though so-called "traditional" students may be in the minority and "non-traditional" students may be in the majority, especially in universities with widening participation agendas, they continue to be disadvantaged or marginalised. This point is explored in "Section 7: Discussion".

1. Introduction

University students' mental wellbeing is increasingly "on the radar" of universities in Australia and internationally. Holistic, institution-wide, settings approaches have been promoted and influenced by various charters and networks.[3] For instance, the international Okanagan Charter (2015)[4] calls for higher education institutions around the world to "advance the core mandate of higher education by improving human and environmental health and well-being, which are determinants of learning, productivity and engagement" (p. 6). Viewed in this way, universities, and academic and professional staff are encouraged to consider mental wellbeing as a teaching and learning issue, and also as a cultural and environmental concern within university settings. In addition to being sites of learning, teaching and learning contexts (face-to-face and online) and curriculum are sites that potentially impact on students' health and wellbeing. This approach prompts a shift from viewing student mental health and wellbeing as an individual student's concern and/or the sole responsibility of university support and counselling services to considering the role, culture, and setting of the whole institution in how it impacts mental wellbeing, and, thus, on students' learning.

In this climate, this 2019/20 NCSEHE Equity Fellowship project set out to investigate university students' perspectives on mental wellbeing and their insights into proactive approaches that they found supportive during their university studies. In particular, it focused on mature-aged students who live in, or come from, regional and remote areas in Australia. Regional and remote students are in the national spotlight as attested by recent national reports (Halsey, 2018; Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019), and government financial commitment[5] to regional and remote scholarships, and to Regional University Centres (DESE, 2020). However, the focus of improving access and participation in higher education has been on school leavers in regional and remote areas. Mature-aged students are largely missing from the discussion, yet they make up a sizeable proportion of the regional and remote cohort,[6] and they have the potential to positively impact their families and communities in regard to changing attitudes towards education, particularly in areas in which educational attainment is low (Johns et al., 2016). In addition, as they are more likely to remain in or return to their regional and remote areas after their studies, their successful participation in higher education has the potential to contribute to regional workforces and industries, and to building regional sustainability. In focusing on the mature-aged sub-group within the regional and remote cohort, this Fellowship research responds to calls for deeper understanding of the diversity and complexity of equity group cohorts (NCSEHE, 2018; Pollard, 2018).

Focusing on the significant issue of student mental wellbeing and the important cohort of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia, this project adopted a mixed-methods approach to build the evidence base and to gain insights from students into

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[3] For example, influential charters include: The 1986 Ottawa Charter (WHO, 2017). The Okanagan Charter (2015) and The University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) in the UK. Networks include: UK Healthy Universities Network (2020); the Tertiary Wellbeing Aotearoa New Zealand (TWANZ, n.d.); and The Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRteN, n.d.).

[4] The Okanagan Charter was developed by participants from universities and organisations from 45 countries; it provides principles and a framework to guide universities and colleges to promote health and support wellbeing on their campuses and in their communities.

[5] Including recent financial support for regional and remote students announced on 19 June 2020 as part of the *Job-ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020*. The Australian Parliament passed this legislation on 19 October 2020.

[6] Regional and remote students made up 20.6 per cent of the 2018 domestic undergraduate student population, which was 157,544 students (See Table 12 in Appendix D). The proportion of "mature-aged students" differs depending on how it is defined (See Section 3 for definitions). It ranges from approximately 30 per cent (for students commencing aged 26 or older) to 60 per cent (for students commencing aged 21 or older) of the regional and remote cohort. See Table 12 in Appendix D for a break down per geographical location for students commencing aged 21 or older and 26 or older.

what factors impact on their mental wellbeing and how students' mental wellbeing can be better supported by universities.

The report commences with background and contextual information in Section 2 on: i) regional and remote students; ii) mature-aged students; and iii) university student mental wellbeing. Common to these three areas are complexities around definitions; these are clarified in Sections 2 and 3. The research methods are outlined in Section 3. The findings and answers to the research questions are presented in Sections 4, 5 and 6. A discussion of the key findings takes place in Section 7. The findings and discussion inform a set of recommendations for universities and government in Section 8 and a set of guidelines for academic and professional staff to proactively support students' mental wellbeing in Section 9.

Illustration 1. Night time

2. Background and context

2.1. Regional and remote students; mature-aged students

2.1.1. Regional and remote students

In the 1990 Australian Government report, *A Fair Chance for All*, a national framework articulated the aim of achieving equity in higher education: that is, to ensure that "the benefits of higher education are within everyone's reach" (p. 5). Six equity groups were identified with the intention of increasing their representation. One of the six was termed "people from rural and isolated backgrounds"; during the 1990s, this group became referred to as "regional and remote students". Since 2018, it has also been divided into two groups, "regional students" and "remote students" in the national higher education student data, which more fully captures their different challenges, experiences and needs.

Regional and remote students have been in the national spotlight with recent government reviews undertaken to improve the higher education access and participation of this cohort in in Australia (Halsey, 2018; Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019). While there has been growth in the participation rates of domestic undergraduate students from equity groups, such as students from low socioeconomic status (SES), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students with disability, the proportions of regional and remote students has been declining. For example, in the 2013–18 period, the share for regional students declined from 20.7 per cent in 2013 to 19.8 per cent in 2018; and, the share for remote students declined from 0.84 per cent in 2013 to 0.79 per cent in 2018 (Koshy, 2019, pp. 7, 14, 16).

A nine-year cohort analysis for three periods (2005–13; 2006–14; 2007–15) by geographical location, found the completion rates for regional (69.4%) and remote (60.3%) students were also lower than for their metropolitan counterparts (74.9%) (Pollard, 2018, p. 15). Compared to metropolitan students, higher proportions of regional students did not return to their studies after their first year, and higher proportions dropped out after re-enrolling; these proportions were even higher for remote students (Pollard, 2018, p. 15). Similarly, Nelson et al. (2017) found the completion rates for equity group students who attended regional universities were lower than for their counterparts who attended metropolitan universities. As Nelson et al. (2017) express, such findings could easily result in a focus on so-called "deficits" of students or institutions; such narratives, however, are simplistic and miss the complexity of multiple, compounding factors:

> *Students from equity groups face a number of structural challenges in accessing, participating and completing higher education, including geographical location, financial constraints, emotional factors and sociocultural incongruity. The impact of belonging to multiple equity groups exacerbates the challenges, which include travel constraints, a lack of access to resources such as high speed internet, affordability of living expenses, the necessity to work whilst studying, challenges to wellbeing including financial stress, isolation from support networks, and challenges to navigating sociocultural incongruities* (p. 2).

Many of the aspects noted in this quotation are situated, systemic and structural in nature. Similarly, Devlin and McKay (2017) found structural impacts contributed to the success of students from low SES areas who were attending regional universities. They explored the combined impact of regionality/rurality and low SES, and found eight high-level factors that supported students' success. The first key factor was students' attributes, specifically that their "own attitude, motivation, determination and resilience helped them succeed at university despite the challenges and obstacles they faced" (p. 31). The other seven factors were: family support; financial security and sustainability; reliable technology; understanding

and responding to students' particular circumstances and needs; facilitating students being and feeling connected to university; student preparedness for the realities of university study; and an inclusive approach to learning and teaching (p. 28). Some of the factors that Nelson et al. (2017), and Devlin and McKay (2017) point out, such as reliable technology and financial security, connect closely with structural issues in society, such as poverty. They also point out other factors, inclusive approaches to teaching and learning, and sociocultural incongruities, which recognise that all students are not the same. These reports acknowledge the impacts of the changing shape of the university sector in Australia and the changing nature of the student cohorts enrolling in universities.

2.1.2. Mature-aged students

Mature-aged students are not a designated equity group. Heagney and Benson (2017) point out that mature-aged students have been ignored in higher education policy, particularly since the *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final report* ("the Bradley Review") (Bradley et al., 2008), as universities have focused on school leavers to achieve the national targets. They have largely been missing from recent national reviews into equity groups, such as on regional and remote students, which have focused on school leavers (Halsey, 2018; Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019).

Mature-aged students often experience compounding disadvantage and multiple challenges in their pursuit of tertiary qualifications as they are often also from low SES backgrounds, which, in turn, overlap with other equity groups (Heagney & Benson, 2017). Furthermore, Mallman and Lee (2016) argue that mature-aged students are not well catered for by higher education institutions, noting that their challenges inside and outside university are not adequately recognised; "older (and other 'non-traditional') students are insufficiently understood, and policies and HE institutional cultures are often ill-suited to their particular needs and interests" (p. 685).

Despite the lack of attention and understanding of the cohort at policy and institutional levels, their multiple challenges and obstacles, as well as their strengths and transformations, are evident in the literature. For instance, managing multiple responsibilities, such as work, children and caring is acknowledged as a key challenge for mature-aged students (Kahu et al., 2014; Stone, 2008; Thompson, 2019). Such multiple commitments and responsibilities mean that "lack of time" is a significant issue for this cohort, which results in many mature-aged students' lives being "a constant juggling act": an ongoing endeavour to balance study, paid work, caring work and everything else (Stone, 2008, p. 277). Financial stress and the financial sacrifices made in order to study are another major concern for mature-aged students (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Heagney & Benson, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Thompson, 2019; Tones et al., 2009).

The gendered nature of some of the challenges experienced by mature-aged students has also been highlighted (O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). For instance, in a qualitative doctoral study of 20 mature-aged students, Stone (2008, p. 278) noted: "The women in particular were juggling the demands of study, housework, children, partners – and, at times, also paid work". In managing the multiplicity of roles, female mature-aged students in Stone's study also experienced guilt and talked of strain and self-blame (p. 278).

The strengths and life experiences with which mature-aged students arrive at university, along with their strong sense of purpose, motivation and resilience is also acknowledged. For example, reporting on a qualitative longitudinal study that tracked 11 mature-aged students through their undergraduate social work course, Heagney and Benson (2017, p. 222) emphasised the "great determination and organisation" shown by the participants to accommodate study, family and work commitments; they noted: "As well as bringing qualities of commitment, resilience and life experience to their studies, mature-age students

are highly motivated and represent a good investment for the universities which enrol and graduate them" (p. 217).

2.1.3. Compounding factors for mature-aged, and regional and remote students

A predominant message in the research that has focused on regional and/or remote students is the "substantial overlap" between regionality/rurality/remoteness and low SES (Cassells et al., 2017). Furthermore, the overlaps occur beyond these two equity groups and include membership of other equity and "equity-like" groups (such as students who are mature-aged or first in their family to attend university) and study modes (such as students studying online or part-time). For example, in the report, *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from Two Decades, 1994-2014,* Baik et al. (2015, p. 78) found:

> *Like students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students (with whom they show a large degree of overlap), students from regional and remote backgrounds were more likely to be older than students from metropolitan backgrounds … They were more likely to be the first in their family to go to university, more likely to have dependents (12%, compared with 7%; p < 0.01) and more likely to be studying part-time (12%, compared with 7%; p < 0.01).*

Similarly, research on mature-aged students points to factors that compound disadvantage, such as multiple equity and equity-like group membership (Heagney & Benson, 2017).

2.2. Student mental health and wellbeing

University students' mental health and wellbeing is changeable. It can fluctuate throughout a semester and can even vary from day to day. Wellbeing can be difficult to "see" and people express their sense of wellbeing in different ways. It might be managed or not managed and can involve a clinical condition or sub-clinical symptoms. One student, for example, might have a diagnosed mental health condition (that is, a mental illness); this student might manage their condition well, with support from community mental health services, and also manage their studies well, and experience optimal mental wellbeing. Another student might not have a diagnosed mental health condition, but not manage the "normal" stresses of university life, and experience poor mental wellbeing and feel "anxious" or "depressed". These contrasting circumstances highlight some of the complexities that surround wellbeing.

This section commences by conceptualising the term "mental wellbeing" for use in this research. It then provides some contextual information and outlines the numerous ways that universities support students' mental wellbeing.

2.2.1. Defining mental health and wellbeing

Difficulties defining the terms

Defining the terms mental health and wellbeing is difficult because the terms have different roots, in medicine and philosophy respectively, and they are used differently in different disciplines and contexts. For instance, in some contexts, the term "mental health" is used to mean being mentally well — having an absence of mental illness; in other contexts, it covers the spectrum from mentally well to mentally unwell; and in other contexts again, such as in media and the general public, "mental health" is often equated with the negative — that is, with mental ill-health.

The conflation of some terms, the substitution of others, and the measuring of one aspect of mental ill-health, for instance, to represent a broader term, such as wellbeing, means that interpreting and evaluating research findings can be challenging (Svane et al., 2019). This mismatch between what is being measured and what is claimed to be measured complicates

endeavours to compare research studies. This lack of clarity has been discussed in the literature (Barkham et al., 2019; Dodge et al., 2012; La Placa et al., 2013; Svane et al., 2019). Barkham et al. (2019, p. 2), for example, are concerned about blurring mental health issues (for example, issues faced by students with a diagnosed mental health condition) with wellbeing issues (for example, programs for the whole student population).

Conceptualising mental wellbeing

Acknowledging that there are numerous definitions of mental health and models of wellbeing, this research is informed by the following:

- the World Health Organization's (2014) definition
- MacKean's (2011) dual-continuum model
- Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-determination theory and adaptations of it for higher education, including:
    - Baik et al. (2016a; 2016c)
    - Woodyatt (2019, 2020).

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2014) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community." The WHO's definition of mental health focuses on a positive dimension. It does not mean that a person with a mental health condition cannot live in a state of wellbeing. As the WHO and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (2014, p. 12) state: "looked at in another way, people living with mental disorder can also achieve good levels of wellbeing – living a satisfying, meaningful, contributing life within the constraints of painful, distressing, or debilitating symptoms". This conceptualisation that "mental health and mental disorders are not opposites", that the absence of one does not mean the presence of the other (World Health Organization & Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2014, p. 12) implies that the WHO are not viewing mental health and wellbeing at one end of a continuum and mental illness at the other: rather, that a dual continuum exists. In the context of tertiary education settings in Canada, MacKean (2011, p. 11) uses a dual continuum model (based on the work of Keyes), which is illustrated in Figure 16 (in Appendix B). Conceptualising mental wellbeing using such a dual continuum model means that a student can experience optimal mental health (that is, be thriving or flourishing), regardless of whether they have a mental illness. From this perspective, and in a teaching and learning context, supporting and enhancing students' mental wellbeing accords to supporting the mental wellbeing of all students.

Baik et al. (2016a, p. 1) refer to a person having different states of mental health and that it "fluctuates over time, in response to many factors including physical health, life events and environmental conditions that increase protective or risk factors". They define mental wellbeing as "a positive state of psychological and emotional health; it indicates that a person is able to function cognitively and emotionally in a manner that is productive and fulfilling." They add: "wellbeing is achieved through optimal development, a 'meaningful' life, and satisfaction of basic human needs" as articulated by Ryan and Deci (2000).

Ryan and Deci (2000) identified three needs – competence, relatedness and autonomy "that appear to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being" (p. 68). Informed by Ryan and Deci (2000), Baik et al. (2016c) identify five factors essential for "wellbeing, or positive mental health and growth": i) autonomous Motivation; ii) a sense of Belonging; iii) positive Relationships with others; iv) experiences of Autonomy, or "being oneself"; and v) experiences of Competence, or being effective, capable. They refer to these factors by the acronym, M-BRAC; the inter-relationships between the five factors are illustrated in Figure 17 (in Appendix B).

Also drawing on Ryan and Deci (2000), Woodyatt (2019, 2020) distils the core themes and commonalities of several models of wellbeing and theories of psychological needs into a framework that consists of the needs for: i) Belonging or Social Identification; ii) Purpose or Meaning; iii) Agency/Autonomy; and iv) Growth or Mastery. Baik et al. (2016c) and Woodyatt's (2019, 2020) frameworks are combined for this research and illustrated in Figure 1 below.
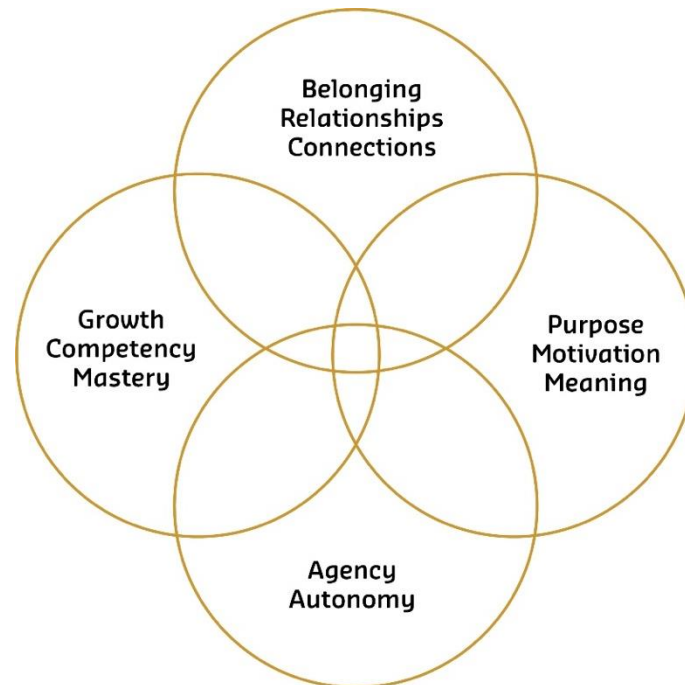
Figure 1. Combination model: psychological needs for student mental wellbeing

2.2.2. University student mental ill-health

Numerous studies and reports have highlighted the prevalence of mental ill-health in university student populations; some have also found that levels of psychological distress are higher than for the general population (Caleb & Barden, 2019; Larcombe et al., 2016; Leahy et al., 2010; Orygen, 2017; Rickwood et al., 2017; Stallman, 2010; van Agteren et al., 2019). In other studies, psychological distress was measured at different times during a course and it was found that students' distress levels worsened across their degree (Bewick et al., 2010). In reporting on students' psychological distress in a medical school in the U.S., Slavin (2016) found that the students finished their university education with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than when they commenced, thus highlighting that university student mental health is indeed an environmental and cultural issue in the university setting.

2.2.3. Approaches to supporting student mental wellbeing

Although student mental wellbeing is currently receiving national and international attention, it has been of concern to universities for many years to varying degrees; universities have provided support in various ways, including centrally-located counselling services; as well as considering settings-based approaches, and teaching and learning contexts (Crawford & Johns, 2018).

Student Support Services: Counselling, Disability/Accessibility, Academic Learning Support

Universities in Australia typically approach student wellbeing through the provision of counselling services, disability/accessibility policies and services, academic learning support services, and orientation and other transition programs.

It is generally the case that universities provide support in the form of centrally located, specialist counselling services. University counselling staff have been reporting an increase in demand for these services and an increase in severity and complexity of presentations (Orygen, 2017). In the summary of the Australian and New Zealand *Heads of Counselling Services Benchmarking Survey 2018,* Andrews (2019, p. 166) noted that "more than 60% of institutions reported an increase in demand for counselling in 2017 compared to 2016", with a variation in increase "from less than or equal to 5% to greater than 20%." All Heads of Counselling Services participants (n=32) agreed or strongly agreed that there had been "a steady increase in the complexity and severity of student mental health presentations along with an increase in the proportion of students affected" over the last decade (Andrews, 2019, p. 167). While increases in presentations to counselling services have been reported, studies point out that the students often in most need of counselling services do not access them or are not aware of them (Morris, 2010; Rosenthal & Wilson, 2008; Storrie et al., 2010).

Support services are often limited or "difficult to provide" on regional campuses, as King et al. (2018, p. 7) explain: "Given the prohibitive cost of supplying comparable resources to those found on metropolitan campuses (due to small regional cohorts vs. larger metropolitan cohorts), students in regional campuses are often at a disadvantage". Providing counselling services to online students is difficult; complexities exist around the counsellor-student relationship and duty of care; the preference has been for students in remote areas to engage with local services, but such services do not always exist. University wellbeing and counselling units often provide mental health and wellbeing resources online for students to access independently, such as *thedesk* (The University of Queensland, 2020).

All students are eligible to access university counselling services; however, students with a diagnosed mental health condition are eligible to access university disability services (also referred to as accessibility services). Disability/accessibility advisors assist students to document how their temporary or permanent condition may impact on their studies, and they arrange accommodations and adjustments via learning access plans.

Most Student Support Services provide support for students transitioning to university in the form of orientation sessions, and mentor and peer study group programs. Some initiatives involve checking in (for instance, via phone) with commencing students to offer assistance with the enrolment stage and guidance during the early weeks of semester. Academic learning support, in the form of centrally-located learning skills advice teams or faculty-based staff, is usually available for students in all years and throughout their course. Increasingly, universities are also engaging external companies to provide 24-7 assistance for students in the form of, for example, feedback on assessment tasks.

In addition to the programs and services provided by university Student Support Services, a large number of universities provide academic support, cultural support and pastoral care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in centres or units for Indigenous studies and student support.[7] University student guilds and associations are another avenue of support, as are support programs at residential colleges.

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[7] For example: the *Tjabal Indigenous Higher Education Centre (*Australian National University, n.d.); and the Riawunna Centre for Aboriginal Education (University of Tasmania, 2020).

A holistic, institution-wide, settings approach

A settings approach to health and wellbeing in a university context encourages an institution-wide holistic approach. According to the *UK Healthy Universities Network* (2020), which formed in 2006, "a Healthy University aspires to create a learning environment and organisational culture that enhances health, wellbeing and sustainability". The link between learning and health is key to this approach (Mulder & Munro, 2015, p. 41). In the Australian context, there are isolated cases of universities taking up settings approaches. For example, Southern Cross University implemented the Healthy Universities approach in 2015, with a specific focus on mental health. More recently, RMIT University have articulated their commitment to promoting student and staff mental health and wellbeing, and recognise it as a core institution-wide priority. For instance, RMIT University has formed a Mental Wellbeing Advisory Group tasked with mapping "high-level priorities and an implementation plan for the immediate future" (RMIT University, 2020).

Momentum has been gaining in the Australian higher education sector more broadly, in regard to high-level acknowledgement of health and wellbeing in university settings, with the formation of the *Australian Health Promoting Universities Network* in 2016 (University of Sydney, 2016), and the convening of the *Inaugural Australasian Mental Health in Higher Education* conference in 2017. The Higher Education Standards Panel (2018), *Final Report, Improving retention, completion and success in higher education,* Recommendation 8[8] states that "Every institution should have an institution-wide mental health strategy and implementation plan" (p. 9). Following acceptance of the recommendation by the Minister for Education in 2018, Universities Australia commissioned Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, to develop the *Australian University Mental Health Framework*. It was launched in December 2020 and provides guidance for the university and mental health sectors (Orygen, 2020). It is anticipated that the uptake of the framework will be at the discretion of individual institutions.

Mental health literacy

Developing mental health literacy has been advocated by Jorm and colleagues for many years, as a preventative approach that focuses on gaining knowledges around mental health and ill-health, and on taking action to prevent and manage mental ill-health and support others (Jorm, 2012; Reavley et al., 2012). In some cases, universities offer courses, workshops and resources for students to develop mental health literacy, and to improve their mental wellbeing and resilience. Such initiatives are often extra-curricular and non-credit bearing modules, which students can undertake independently.[9] In some cases, they are credit-bearing,[10] and in some institutions, teaching staff are supported and encouraged to embed mental health literacy in the curriculum.[11]

Student mental wellbeing: a teaching and learning issue

There is increasing recognition that student mental wellbeing does not exist independently of the teaching and learning environment. In the last decade, some academic staff in medical and legal education, in particular, have responded to the concerning levels of university student psychological distress by considering how their teaching and learning environments and curriculum design foster or hinder student engagement and wellbeing. For example, law

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[8] Recommendation Eight is influenced by the *Higher Education Standards Framework* (2015). Standard 2.3.3 (p. 7) explicitly refers to mental health and wellbeing needs in the context of support service provision. Furthermore, Standard 6.1.4 (p. 12) mentions fostering student and staff wellbeing in the context of corporate governance.

[9] For example: Dias et al. (2019); Ryerson University (n.d.).

[10] For example: Queen's University (2021).

[11] For example: The University of British Columbia (n.d.).

academics, such as Field and colleagues, have intentionally reshaped the law curriculum to promote student wellbeing (Duffy et al., 2011; Field & Duffy, 2012; Field et al., 2013; Field et al., 2016; Field & Jepson, 2014; Field & Kift, 2010). A focus on curricula, and teaching and learning is supported by Larcombe and Fethers' (2013, p. 90) study of law students that found "a strong independent association between severe+ [plus] symptoms of depression and anxiety and students' perceptions of the law school and their teachers as controlling, unnecessarily restrictive and as not affording reasonable choices and alternatives to students".

In recent decades, research on the student experience, particularly on the first year in higher education (FYHE) experience, and transition to university, has recommended university-wide approaches, and the embedding of support. For example, in the Australian context, Kift and colleagues' "third generation transition pedagogy" has encouraged and aspires to implementing a holistic institution-wide approach to the student experience and engagement in which the academic, social, and support elements of a student's experience coexist seamlessly within the student's course (Kift, 2009, 2015; Kift et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2014).

Treating student mental health and wellbeing as a teaching and learning issue underpinned the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) project, *Enhancing Student Wellbeing*, which focused on the role of academic educators (Baik et al., 2017), as well as developing a framework for promoting university student wellbeing (Baik et al., 2016b). It is also core to King et al.'s (2018) suite of resources for students and staff in low SES regional areas. In the discipline of psychology in an Australian university, Brooker et al. (2019) are currently taking a whole-of-curriculum approach to student wellbeing, which involves considering the interactions between "all aspects of the curriculum, from beginning to graduation (including learning objectives, expectations, resources, assessments, teaching approaches, activities, timetabling, outcomes, and content" and how they impact student wellbeing (p. 56). In the UK, researchers involved in the national multi-institutional project, Education for Mental Health, are investigating how students' mental wellbeing can be supported through the curriculum and pedagogy (University of Derby, 2019). The link between supporting mental wellbeing and a student's engagement and learning is also at the core of enabling pedagogies and practices, and pedagogies of care (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Crawford et al., 2019; Crawford et al., 2016; Lisciandro et al., 2016).

Together, these examples provide emerging evidence that students' mental wellbeing is implicated in the everyday interactions, relations and practices of their university studies, and emphasise the importance of the teaching and learning environment being supportive of students' mental wellbeing.

2.2.4. Factors that impact university student mental health and wellbeing

Factors that impact students' mental health and wellbeing are numerous. They range from personal and individual factors, including physical and mental health, to demographic, structural, systemic and temporal factors. They include stressors and supports inside and outside university teaching and learning environments including: academic pressures; financial pressures; family and relationship pressures; workload; relocation for studies; transitional stress between levels of education; establishing new social networks, drug and alcohol use; poor diet; and lack of sleep (McIntyre et al., 2018; Orygen, 2017; Rickwood et al., 2017; Said et al., 2013; Thompson, 2019).

The *Open Minds* project at the University of Brighton found that student wellbeing is impacted by factors related to students' academic work (60%), as well as challenges in their personal lives, such as work-life balance and financial issues (Morris, 2010, p. 25). The Australian and New Zealand *Heads of Counselling Services Benchmarking Survey 2018* (Andrews, 2019, pp. 156-157) reported that the top five presenting issues at university

counselling services in 2017 were: stress (96.9%); mental ill-health (81.3%); relationship issues (71.9%); academic progress (68.8%); and low mood (68.8%).[12] The recent *Student Experience Surveys* (QILT, 2019, pp. vi, 24-27; 2020, pp. 19-20) conducted in 2018 and 2019 found that 19 per cent of respondents seriously considered leaving their course in 2018 and 20 per cent in 2019. The students who considered leaving were more likely to be students with lower grades; low SES compared to medium SES and high SES; and regional and remote compared to metropolitan (QILT, 2019, pp. vi, 24). The most common reasons for considering leaving were: health and stress (45% in 2018 and 46% in 2019); study-life balance (30% in 2018 and 2019); difficulties related to workload (27% in 2018 and 25% in 2019); and the need to do paid work (25% in 2018 and 27% in 2019). Studies have also shown the temporal nature of stress with "pressure points" at different times of semester and within a course (Bewick et al., 2010; Meyer, 2019).

This background section has provided contextual information around the three foci of this study: regional and remote students; mature-aged students; and student mental wellbeing.

Illustration 2. Juggling

3. Research design and methods

This section provides an overview of the research design, approach and methods. This project has two overarching research questions:

1. What factors impact on the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students in, and from, regional and remote Australia? (RQ1)
2. What are proactive approaches that support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged undergraduate university students in, and from, regional and remote in Australia? (RQ2)

The sub-research question: "who are mature-aged university students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?" is necessary as a starting point for approaching the two overarching research questions.

3.1. Research design and approach

This project followed a concurrent transformative mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014). A mixed-methods design enabled the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research to be combined to provide both broad and in-depth answers to the research questions. The nature of the inquiry necessitated that hybrid perspectives—feminist, social justice and equity— underpin the design. They inform a focus on inequities and inequalities, and inclusions and exclusions, and on providing strategies for change and benefits for the target group and/or for students who follow in their paths.

The conceptual framework is influenced by a number of bodies of work, and holistic and inclusive approaches to teaching, learning and support [which are outlined in Section 2 and in Crawford and Johns (2018)]. Aligning with the mixed-methods design, this project incorporates several research paradigms: interpretive/constructivist and transformative, and it is also, therefore, pragmatic. It is informed by multiple conceptualisations of mental wellbeing (see Section 2). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (illustrated in Figure 2) also informs this research; it provides a way to view a student's everyday life worlds of university, home, work and local community (that is, their micro-level systems), and the interactions between them (the mesosystem), and it also enables a consideration of the systemic and structural, and the social, cultural, political and historical factors that also impact on an individual (that is, the macro and chrono-level systems), as well as the interactions and interplay between the various layers of the ecosystem (Emery, 2019; Eriksson et al., 2018).
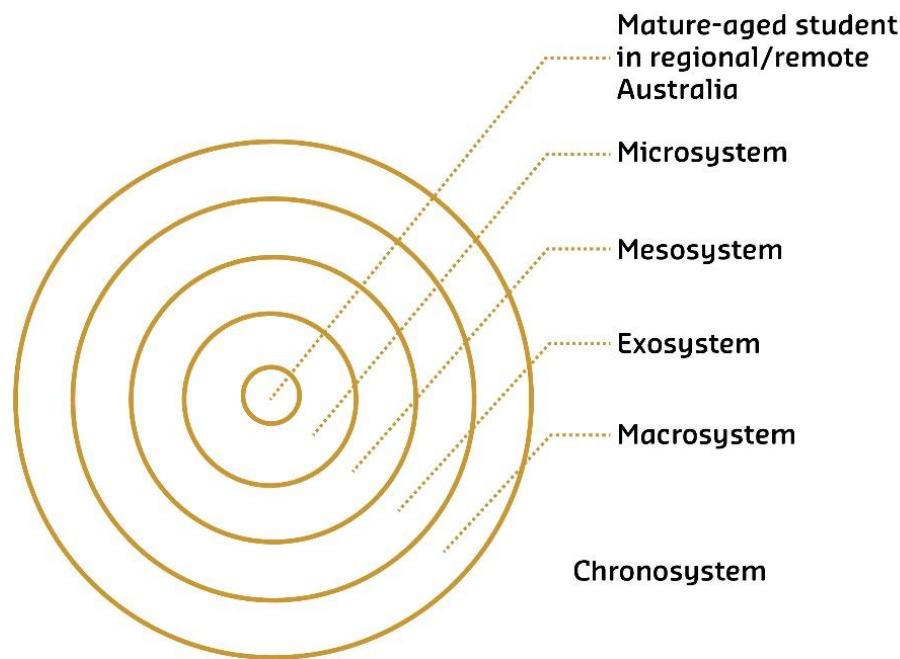
Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is drawn on to demonstrate that students are located within multiple interacting microsystems (for example: university, family, work, local community) that impact positively and negatively on their mental wellbeing, and which are also influenced by other layers of the broader ecosystem. This theory allows for an understanding of the complexities, interactions and interplay between the different systems.

3.2. Target population and defining the terms

The target population for this research was mature-aged undergraduate university students in (and from) regional and remote areas in Australia. The inclusion criteria for the participants were as follows:

- Students were 21 years of age or older at the commencement of their undergraduate course; and
- they were living and studying in a regional or remote area or had relocated from a regional or remote area for their studies; and
- they were studying in an undergraduate course in the year in which they undertook the survey (that is, in 2019).

3.2.1. Defining mature-aged students

There is no standard definition of mature-aged students in higher education in Australia.[13] For the purposes of this study, a mature-aged student is defined as 21 years of age or older at commencement of the student's course. Selecting the age of 21 or older rather than 26 or older allows for the data to be explored for similarities or differences between, for instance, the 21–25 and 26–30 age bands.

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[13] For example, a Google search of "mature-aged students" at various Australian universities reveals different definitions. The Australian National University defines mature-aged students as students who are over the age of 21 when they commence their studies. The University of Melbourne defines the term as older than 23. Western Sydney University uses the definition of not being a current school leaver. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) article, 'Hitting the books: Characteristics of higher education students' uses the terms "younger students (aged 15-24 years) and older students of working age (aged 25-64 years)". Stone & O'Shea (2019) follow the ABS's usage. Paul Koshy (email communication, 2017) explained "Generally, it is somewhere between age 21 and 25".

3.2.2. Defining regional and remote students

A profusion of terms are used to define and classify students who come from or reside in regional, rural and remote areas in Australia.[14] For the purposes of this project, the term "regional and remote students" is used because "regional" and "remote" are used in: i) the equity group, "regional and remote students"; and in ii) the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Remoteness Structure (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), which is used to classify students' geographical location by the DESE and university data units. The term "rural" may be used in the findings/discussion sections of this report if the term is used by a student participant or in the literature and more accurately evokes a student's experience.

The ASGS Remoteness Structure consists of five categories: Major City (RA 1); Inner Regional (RA 2); Outer Regional (RA 3); Remote (RA 4); Very Remote (RA 5). The target population for this study were from the areas: Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote, and Very Remote, as illustrated in Figure 3:
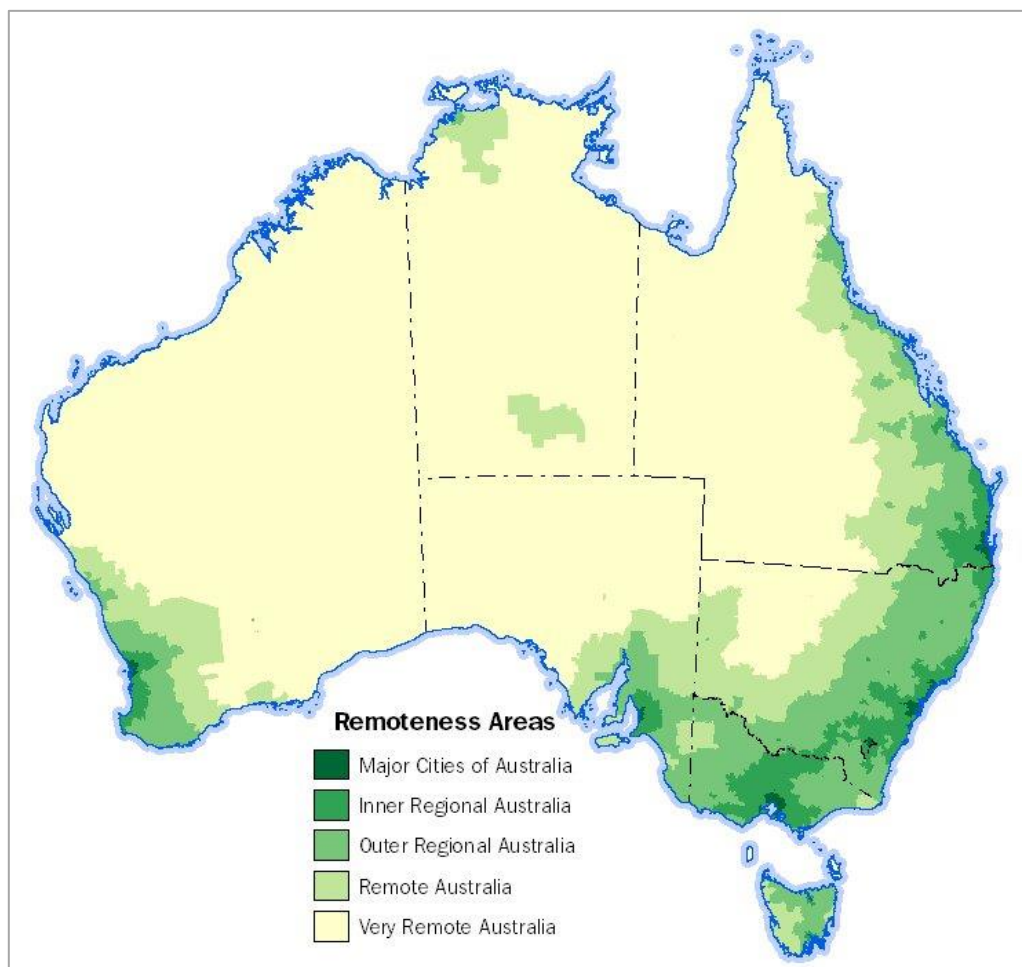
Figure 3. ABS Map of the 2016 remoteness areas of Australia

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[14] For example, "regional and remote", "regional, rural and remote", "rural and remote" and "rural and isolated" have all been used to describe the areas in Australia outside of the major cities. For the different classifications and terms used, see Burnheim and Harvey (2016).

3.2.3. Mental wellbeing: clarifying the setting and scope

How "mental wellbeing" is conceptualised for this research is detailed in Section 2.2.1. Aligning with holistic, institution-wide approaches promoted in numerous reports (as noted in Section 1), this research is interested in what universities, academic and professional staff can do at all levels of the institution to support students' mental wellbeing—that is, to help students manage the "normal" stresses of university and life, so they can thrive and reach their academic goals and potential—whether they have a mental health condition or not. Student mental wellbeing is viewed as a teaching and learning issue, and also as a cultural and environmental concern within university settings. It is also considered at multiple levels within and beyond the university setting by applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This research project does not focus specifically on mental illness; neither does it focus on community mental health services.

3.3. Participant recruitment: survey and interviews

This project received ethics approval from the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee on 29 August 2019, reference number H0018332. The recruitment strategies were twofold: i) high-level and ii) equity and regional networks/social-media approaches. For the high-level approach, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic (DVC A) (equivalent) at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) invited all DVC A's (and equivalents) around Australia to participate. Participation involved the DVC As approving the survey to be administered to the specified target group at their university, via an email invitation (including the survey link); the datasets were compiled by the data teams at the participating universities, using the inclusion criteria mentioned above. Creating the dataset was not possible at one university; in this case, the survey was promoted by emailing students located on regional campuses and in specific courses that were known to have high numbers of mature-aged students.

The second recruitment approach involved promoting the research to networks and organisations that advocated for student equity, and regional and remote students. These organisations included: the Country Universities Centre (NSW); Regional Study Hubs/Regional University Centres network; Equity Practitioners in Higher Education in Australasia (EPHEA); and the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). With these organisations promoting the research on their websites and social media, news of the research spread further, for example, to Studiosity, who also promoted the survey to the specified target group. Students were recruited for the student interviews through the survey. After completing the survey, respondents were invited to indicate their interest in participating in an interview at a later date.

The online survey was undertaken by undergraduate mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia in October/November 2019.[15] There were 2,410 survey respondents, with approximately 1,800 respondents completing most questions and 1,674 completing every question. The total number of respondents varied by question.

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[15] Please note that all of the data collection took place prior to COVID-19 reaching Australia and impacting university course delivery.

3.4. Methods

This research employed three methods, shown in Figure 4 and described in 3.4.1.
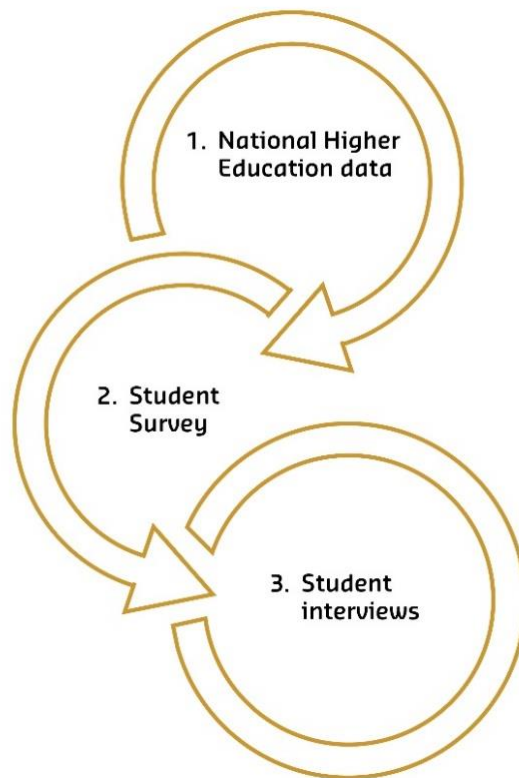
Figure 4. Research methods

3.4.1. National higher education student data

In order to formulate a profile of mature-aged students in (and from) regional and remote areas in Australia, a data request was submitted to the University Statistics Team in the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) in 2019.

Data on all 2018 domestic undergraduate students and mature-aged commencers (that is, students aged 21 or older at the commencement of their course) were requested in aggregate (for students' first address and their current address), which included splits by demographic data, type of attendance, study mode, and equity groups, for several indicators, including: Participation (2018) (head count); Six-year cohort completion rates (%) (2013 – 2018); and Nine-year cohort completion rates (%) (2010–18).

Descriptive statistics methods were used to describe the raw data; for example, tables, graphs and other visual representations of the data enabled comparisons to be made between:

- regional and remote students and their metropolitan counterparts
- all undergraduate students (that is, of all ages) and students who commenced their course aged 21 or older in each geographical location
- different demographic characteristics and equity groups in each geographical location.

3.4.2. Student survey

A survey questionnaire was designed and administered online. The survey was cross-sectional. The development of the survey instrument was an iterative process. The survey questions were informed by the research questions and the literature on university student mental health and wellbeing, as well as ecological systems theory. Numerous validated measures were considered for inclusion; however, upon each investigation it was concluded that the measures, which are used in studies that measure students' mental health (for instance, students' levels of psychological distress) would not adequately answer the research questions. Therefore, a new survey questionnaire was designed, consisting of six sections:

1. factors that impact on students' mental wellbeing (within and outside the university setting)
2. students' experiences of their course, the learning environment, and the university
3. stressful periods and managing at university
4. university Student Support Services, events and information
5. open-ended questions
6. students' details.

Sections 1–3 included items that were measured using a Likert scale; the responses were mostly divided into six categories: strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree; does not apply to me. A small number of statements were purposefully posed in the negative to avoid respondents answering questions with Likert responses in the same way (Walter, 2013). Section 4 consisted of a series of five contingency questions about students' awareness of mental health/wellbeing services, events and resources at their university. Section 5 included several open-ended questions that asked students how they supported their mental wellbeing, and what they thought universities could do better to support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia. Section 6 concluded the survey with demographic questions with mostly multiple-choice responses.

The survey instrument underwent several rounds of peer review (including by some members of the Fellowship Advisory Group, research team members, Fellowship critical friends, statistics expert), and it was piloted by students and colleagues for comprehension, language, tone and length. The survey was anonymous and conducted online via Qualtrics Survey Software (using the University of Tasmania's School of Education's licence). The survey took approximately 20–30 minutes for students to complete.

Descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative survey data was undertaken. As with the Department data described above, tables and graphs of the raw data were compiled for the first level of analysis to identify patterns, anomalies, and areas for further analysis. The data were then entered in SPSS 26 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.). Specific questions were investigated for associations between variables using cross tabulations and tested for significant differences using Chi-square tests. The $p<0.05$ significance level was used for all tests.

A detailed thematic analysis was undertaken on the open-ended questions by two researchers who conducted the coding of the data. One researcher read the open-ended responses and mapped similarities and differences employing a situational analysis mapping approach (Clarke, 2003). The other researcher undertook a close read of the responses, inductively coding them using NVivo 12 software. From these coding methods a code book was generated from NVivo and the two researchers discussed this inductive coding together to cluster similar codes into categories.

3.4.3. Student interviews

The student interviews explored individual student stories: that is, students' lived experiences and the complexities of their circumstances. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, with open-ended questions, which allowed for detailed information to be expressed by the participants.

Seven hundred and sixty students indicated their interest in participating in an interview. Due to the project timeframe, funding and the research design, 51 interviews were conducted in a two-week period in February 2020.[16]

A team of four interviewers conducted the interviews. Prior to commencement, the team had several meetings to: i) ensure an understanding of the research project, familiarise interviewers with the top-level findings of the surveys, and the purpose and focus of the interviews; ii) discuss techniques for interviewing, including setting the tone and creating a rapport at the beginning of each interview, and practical advice for recording; iii) discuss different scenarios and how to respond in the event that an interviewee became upset or distressed.

The duration for the interviews was 30–45 minutes. They were conducted over the telephone rather than by video conference (that is, Skype or Zoom). Telephone interviews were chosen to help maintain privacy for participants and to minimise interviews being impacted by internet access, given that interviewees were in regional and remote Australia where internet connections are not always reliable. Conducting interviews by telephone instead of face-to-face was a pragmatic decision; it was a cost-effective way of interviewing participants from all over regional and remote Australia.

The interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym. Transcripts were emailed to participants so they could check they were an accurate account of the interview. The interviewers wrote a summary of each interview after it was completed, which facilitated early reflections and starting points for analysis.

Exploratory qualitative analysis of the interview data was undertaken with the goal of developing in-depth descriptions of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia. The analysis was iterative and occurred in stages. Each interviewer analysed the interviews they conducted with a set of guiding questions, followed by analysis meetings with the team of interviewers. The process of analysis was subjective and each interviewer interpreted the data from their perspectives as a teacher, researcher, equity practitioner and/or student. This process valued the multiple perspectives brought to the analysis by the four interviewers.

The purpose of the analysis was twofold:

1. Analyse the interview data for similarities or differences with the survey data, and in greater depth, in order to:

   - triangulate the survey findings
   - provide perspectives on the themes and categories from the survey findings in greater depth
   - find and interpret gaps in the survey data.

2. Analyse the interviews as stories, in order to:
   - preserve individual student experiences in the analysis process
   - provide perspectives from students that might be silent in the survey

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[16] See Table 11 in Appendix C for demographic information about the interviewees.

- provide holistic pictures/vignettes of individual student experiences to illustrate the diversity within the target group.

To depict the differences in students' experiences and circumstances, composite narratives were drafted (Willis, 2019). Each was formed from multiple students who shared similar characteristics and challenges. These narratives also informed the conceptualisation and development of illustrations, presented throughout this report, that visually represent the circumstances and experiences of the participants.[17]

The layers of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provided a framework for analysing the survey and interview data (see Table 9 in Section 7). In accordance with the mixed-method design, the data generated from the three methods was complementary and converged to assist in the triangulation of the findings.

3.5. Potential limitations and mitigation strategies

One limitation of the research is that by the nature of the participant recruitment occurring via universities, the invitation to participate was sent to students who were enrolled in an undergraduate course. It was not sent to students who had withdrawn. Surveying and/or interviewing students who had withdrawn would likely provide other perspectives on university student mental wellbeing that are important to understand and worthy of future research.

Another limitation is the timing of when the survey was administered. Due to the tight time frame for the project (that is, 12 months) and with the Fellowship commencing in July, the student survey was administered towards the end of the Australian academic year. At this time, some universities were unable to administer the survey, due to it being the exam period or a period of time when they had a ban on external surveys. Fortunately, this timing did not impinge on the survey response, with the involvement of more universities and students than expected in the original project proposal.

As with all research, quantitative and qualitative, decisions are made at every step of the research process, and there is always the potential for researcher and participant bias. I commenced this research having taught in universities for more than 15 years, including nearly a decade in enabling education, and with an interest in equity, inclusion, and student and staff mental wellbeing. The research design included strategies to minimise researcher bias, which included establishing an advisory group for the fellowship and assembling a research team comprising research assistants and critical friends with a range of experiences and backgrounds in higher education. The research process was highly collaborative; for example, members from the advisory group, research assistants and critical friends variously contributed to, and provided peer review on the design of the questionnaire, the interview schedule and to the analytical frames used. This process of seeking input and critical feedback at each stage helped to mitigate researcher bias.

Employing a mixed-methods design with three different data collection methods is another way to lessen the potential for bias. For example, the national higher education student raw data was compiled by staff in the DESE data unit; the study survey, being an anonymous online questionnaire, was self-administered by the participants; and the interviews were researcher-administered. Each data-collection method has its positives and negatives (Walter, 2013). The multiple methods enhance the trustworthiness of the data collection.

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[17] Along with the composite narratives, the illustrations will be used in professional development materials to be developed in 2021 for academic and professional staff.
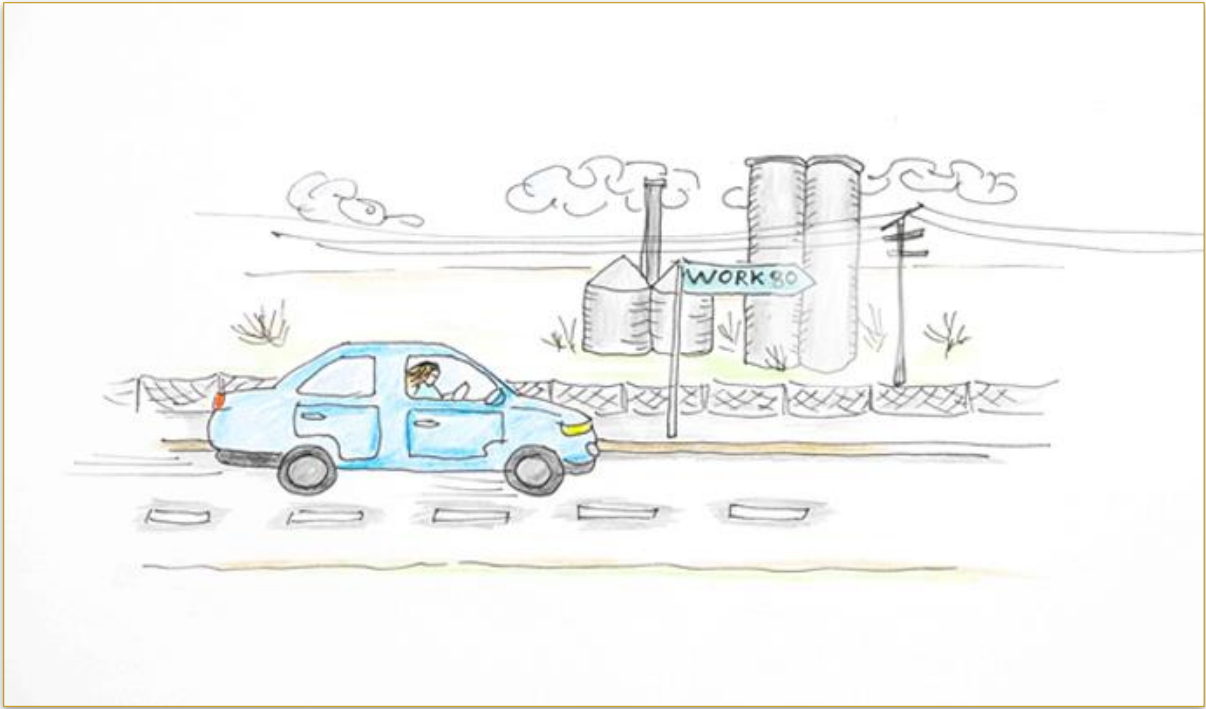
Illustration 3. Off to work

4. Who are mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia?

To address the sub-research question: "Who are mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia?", this section paints a picture of the target cohort by drawing on three sources of data:

- national higher education student data[18]
- student survey data (quantitative)
- student survey and student interview data (qualitative).

4.1. National higher education student data

The "2018 Domestic Undergraduate Participation by geographical location" DESE data (see Table 1) shows that 20.6 per cent of all undergraduate students were in/from regional and remote Australia. More than half (52.8%) of all domestic undergraduate students in all geographical areas were aged 21 or older at the commencement of their degree (referred to as 21+ commencers). The proportion of 21+ commencers was higher in regional and remote areas (59.2%, 57.1% and 61.8% for inner regional, outer regional, and remote/very remote respectively) compared to metropolitan areas (51.4%).

An analysis of the data highlights that compared to students studying in major cities, higher proportions of students studying in regional and remote areas were:

- female
- studying part-time
- studying online (referred to as external students in the DESE data)
- from a low SES area
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (referred to as Indigenous students in the DESE data).

Overlaying these demographic, equity group, type of attendance and study mode characteristics with age found that the aforementioned list of characteristics were even more pronounced for older students, as is evident in Table 1, in which a comparison can be seen between students who commenced their undergraduate course at any age with students who commenced at the age of 21 or older.

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[18] The national higher education student data is from the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). The data are from a customised data request (described in Section 3) for this NCSEHE Equity Fellowship research project.

Table 1. 2018 Domestic Undergraduate Participation: proportion of students by geographical location and age (21+ commencers and all students, by first address)[19]

	All areas	Metro	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote / very remote
All ages (%)	99.8[20]	79.2	14.0	5.8	0.8
21+ (%)	**52.8**	**51.4**	**58.2**	**57.1**	**61.8**
Female (%), all ages	58.4	56.8	63.5	65.3	68.5
Female (%), 21+	**63.6**	**61.6**	**68.3**	**69.9**	**74.4**
Male (%), all ages	41.6	43.2	36.5	34.7	31.5
Male (%), 21+	**36.4**	**38.4**	**31.7**	**30.1**	**25.6**
Indigenous (%), all ages	1.9	1.3	3.1	5.3	11.2
Indigenous (%), 21+	**2.9**	**2.0**	**4.1**	**7.3**	**15.1**
External (%), all ages	16.0	12.8	26.7	29.5	42.7
External (%), 21+	**40.0**	**34.9**	**50.8**	**59.8**	**74.6**
Part-time (%), all ages	26.0	24.7	30.2	31.0	38.4
Part-time (%), 21+	**41.9**	**39.5**	**46.2**	**50.1**	**59.9**
Low SES (%), all ages	17.9	14.8	28.2	33.7	31.3
Low SES (%), 21+	**21.2**	**17.1**	**32.3**	**35.4**	**30.6**
Medium SES (%), all ages	50.5	48.2	60.3	58.3	59.0
Medium SES (%), 21+	**51.9**	**50.3**	**56.6**	**56.5**	**58.7**
High SES (%), all ages	31.3	36.9	11.1	7.5	8.1
High SES (%), 21+	**26.5**	**32.4**	**10.3**	**7.2**	**9.2**
Disability (%), all ages	7.3	7.1	8.5	7.0	5.7
Disability (%), 21+	**8.3**	**8.3**	**9.3**	**7.5**	**4.8**
NESB (%), all ages	3.2	3.7	1.2	1.9	2.0
NESB (%), 21+	**4.3**	**5.1**	**1.6**	**2.4**	**3.0**

For example, focusing on "Female" in Table 1, it is evident that the proportion of female students increases from metropolitan to inner regional to outer regional to remote/very remote for females of "all ages" and for females who were "21+ commencers". The proportions are higher for 21+ commencers than for students commencing at any age. This pattern also occurs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; for students who

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[19] The First-in-Family (FiF) data has not been included in this table because it is incomplete, and, therefore, inaccurate, with large numbers of students being categorised as "unknown".

[20] The missing 0.2 per cent here is "unidentified".

studied part-time; and for students who studied online (external), as illustrated below in Figures 5, 6 and 7.
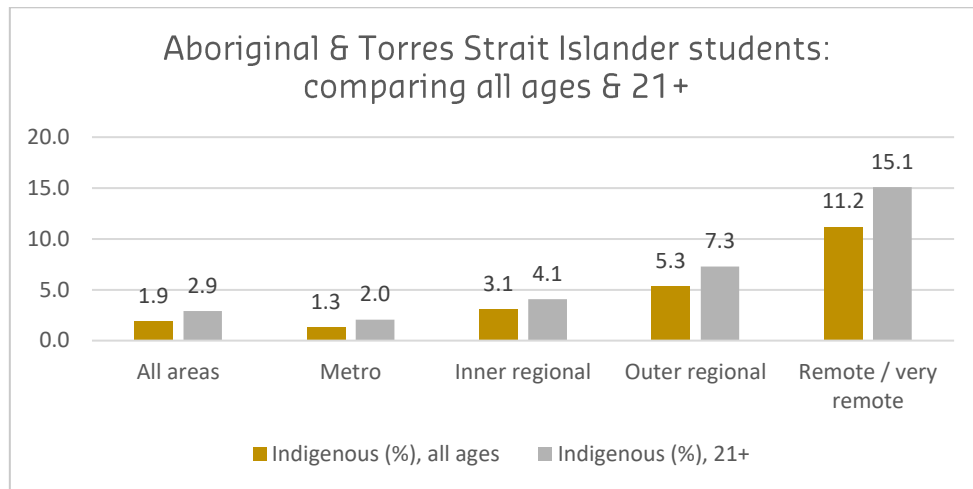
Figure 5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: proportions by geographical location for all ages and 21+ commencers[21]
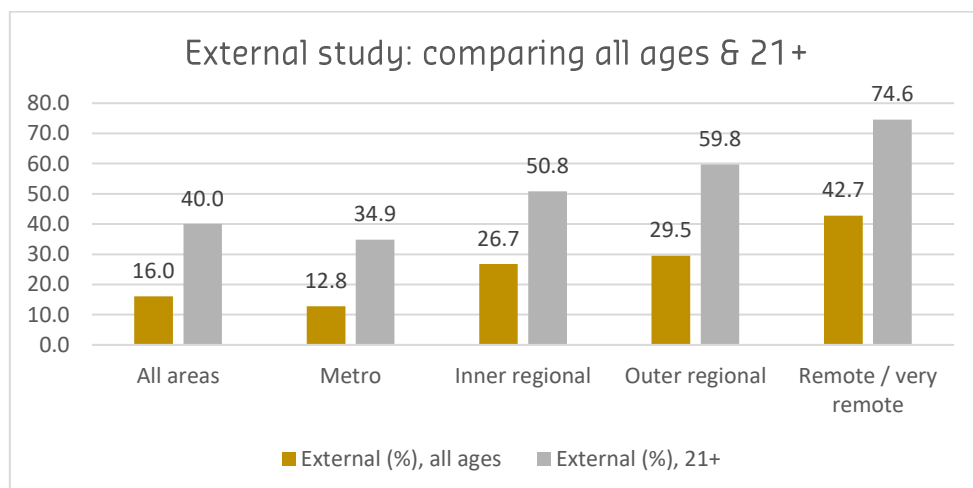
Figure 6. Online (external) study: proportions by geographical location for all ages and 21+ commencers

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[21] This data needs to be interpreted carefully. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are underrepresented in universities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019a). As illustrated in Table 14 (in Appendix D), the higher percentages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who were 21+ commencers, in the regional and remote areas track with higher numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and remote areas; this is particularly the case for the inner regional and outer regional areas.
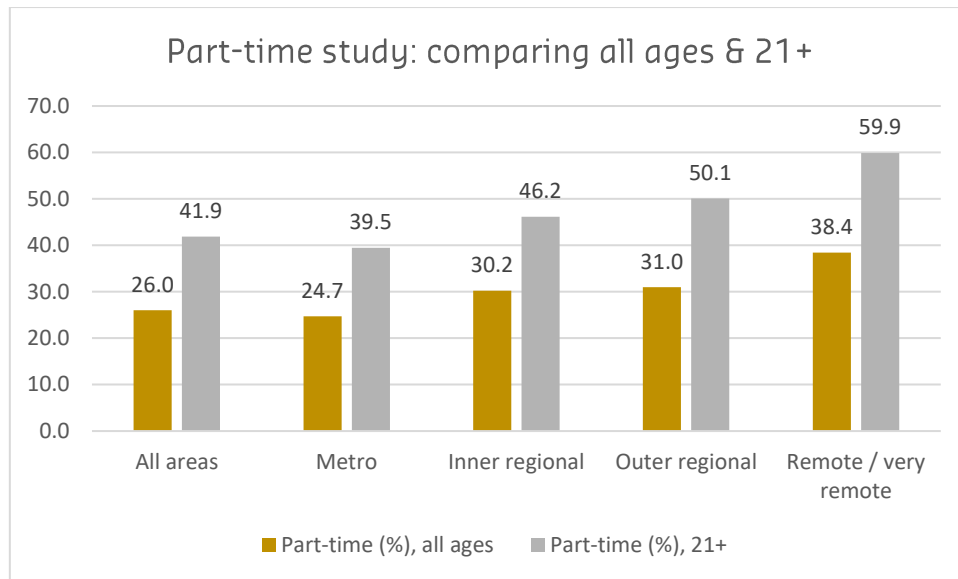
Figure 7. Part-time study: proportions by geographical location for all ages and 21+ commencers
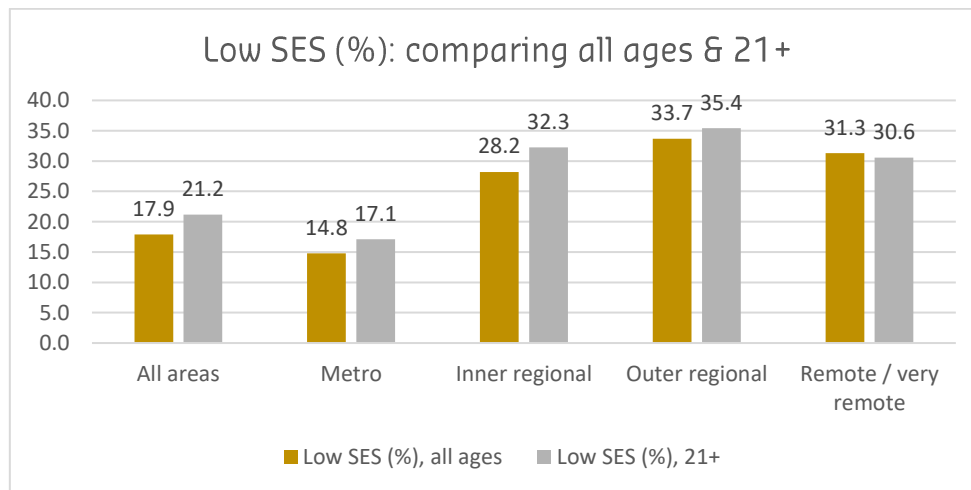
Figure 8. Low SES: proportions by geographical location for all ages and 21+ commencers[22]

Proportions of students from low SES areas also increased with remoteness, with the exception of a decrease in the remote/very remote geographical location (for a breakdown of all SES categories, see Table 1 above).

Age was further analysed by age bands. The proportion of students aged twenty years or younger is lower in the regional and remote areas compared to metropolitan areas (see Table 12 in Appendix D). The proportion of students aged 21–25 decreased from metropolitan to inner regional to outer regional to remote/very remote areas. The opposite was the case for the age bands 26–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, which increased with remoteness (as illustrated in Figure 9 and Table 13 in Appendix D).

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[22] The SES data needs to be interpreted carefully. The higher proportions of low SES students in regional and remote areas aligns with the higher numbers of low SES people living in these areas. As is evident when comparing SES data in Table 1 with SES population data in Table 15 in Appendix D, low SES students were underrepresented in each geographical location.
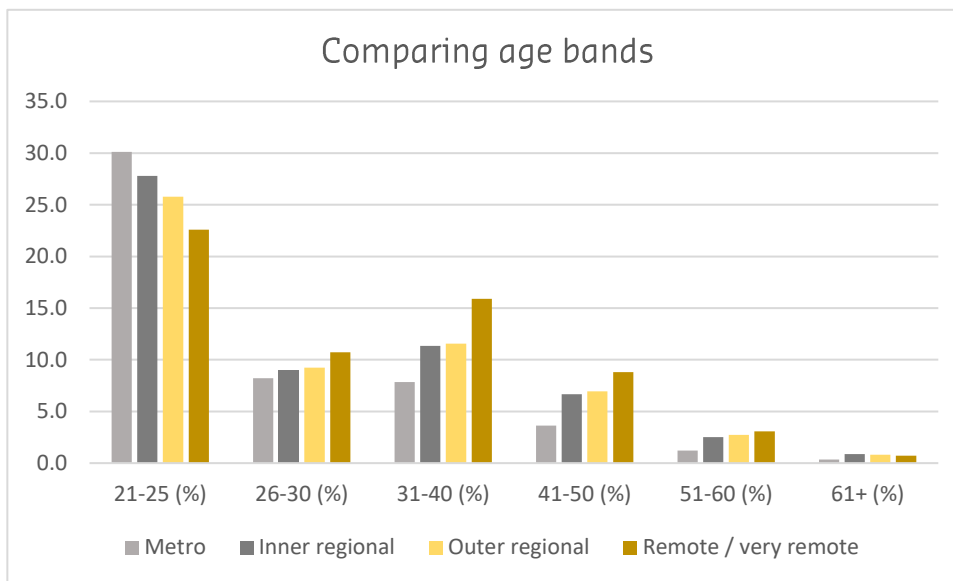
Figure 9. Age bands: proportion of students by geographical location

The data show there are notable patterns in the regional and remote student cohort; the more remote the student's location, the higher the proportions of students who were female, studying online and part-time. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students increased with remoteness. The proportion of students from low SES and medium SES areas was far higher for the regional and remote locations compared to the major cities. These patterns were even more pronounced for older students: that is, for students who were aged 21 or older at the commencement of their degree.

Having analysed the national level data, the next section presents the demographic information of the students who participated in the student survey.

4.2. Student survey data (quantitative findings)

The approximately 1,800 survey participants came from regional and remote areas all over Australia, in all states and territories. While they were enrolled in 31 of the 40 Australian universities, the majority of participants were from 15 universities, which included: universities based in regional areas: universities based in major cities with regional campuses; universities based in major cities with no regional presence; universities with on-campus and online delivery; and universities with a focus on online delivery.

The participants studied in a range of fields, with the most common being arts, humanities and social sciences (21.2%, n=378); education/teaching (14.0%, n=250); nursing (11.5%, n=203); health sciences (11.1%, n=198); business (9.6%, n=170); and psychology (8.7%, n=155). The participants were spread across the year levels with 27.5 per cent (n=490) in their first year of study; 22.8 per cent (n=405) in their second year; 17.9 per cent (n=318) in their third year; and the remainder were in their fourth, fifth or later year of study.

The student survey data were analysed by demographic characteristics, study mode, attendance type, and other key features of the university experience.

4.2.1. Demographic characteristics

The demographic survey data concurs with the national higher education student data, particularly in regard to gender, with a higher proportion of females than males participating in the survey, and study mode and type of attendance, with the majority of survey respondents studying online/distance and part-time, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Student survey: study mode and type of attendance

Study mode	Number	Percentage (%)
On-campus	414	23.2
Online/distance	942	52.8
A mix of both	427	24.0
Total	1,783	100.0
Type of attendance	Number	Percentage (%)
Full-time	815	45.8
Part-time	966	54.2
Total	1,781	100.0

The age of the respondents was fairly evenly spread across the age bands, with the exception of lower numbers in the 61-70 and 71+ age bands. Some key characteristics of the survey participants are as follows:

- 75.9 per cent of the respondents were female.
- 4.7 per cent identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
- 47.5 per cent identified as being the first in their family to attend university.
- 10.1 per cent identified as coming from a non-English speaking background.
- 1.3 per cent identified as coming from a refugee background.
- 12.1 per cent reported having a disability.
- 29.2 per cent reported having a diagnosed medical condition.
- 31.0 per cent reported having a diagnosed mental health condition.

The demographic survey data also provide information about whether the respondents relocated for their studies, along with information about their commitments outside of their university studies, inferred from their living and working situations.
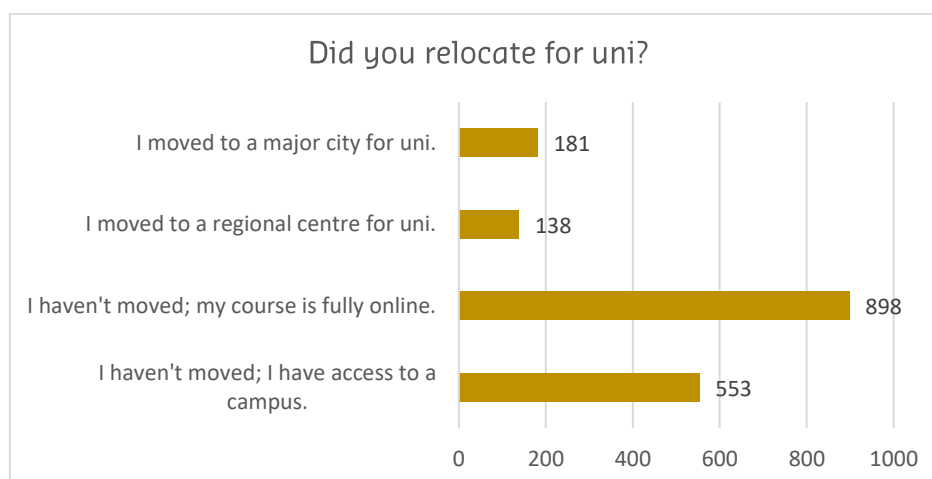
Figure 10. Student survey: remained in regional/remote area or relocated

A majority of the survey respondents (82.0%, n=1,451) did not relocate for their university studies; 61.9 per cent (n=898) of this sub-group (n=1,451) studied fully online, and 38.1 per cent (n=553) had access to a regional university campus. It is expected that mature-aged students would not have the flexibility to relocate for their studies, given family and work commitments in their regional or remote areas.
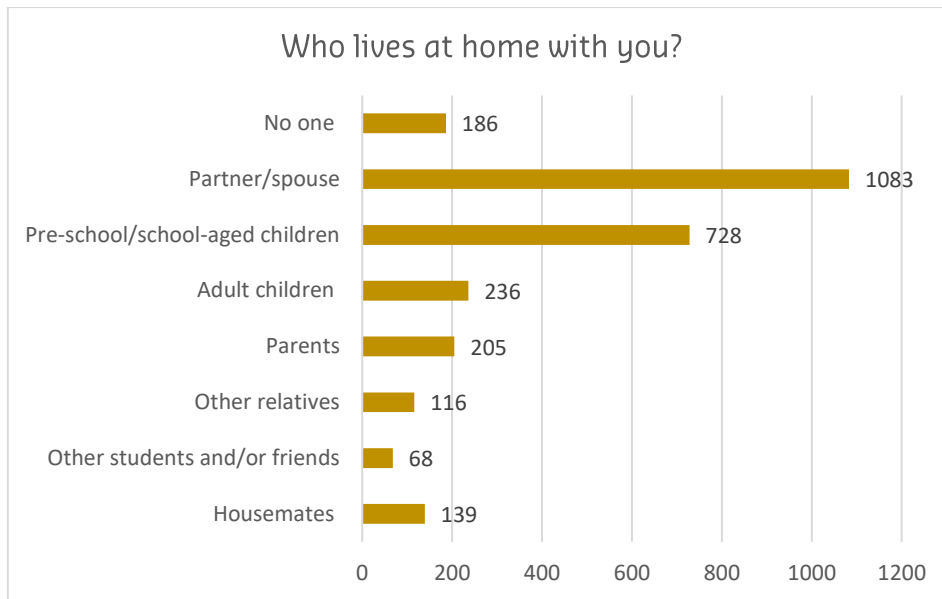
Figure 11. Student survey: living arrangement

A large minority of the respondents (41.1%, n=728) had children under 18 years of age living at home, and 61.2 per cent (n=1,083) lived with a partner/spouse.
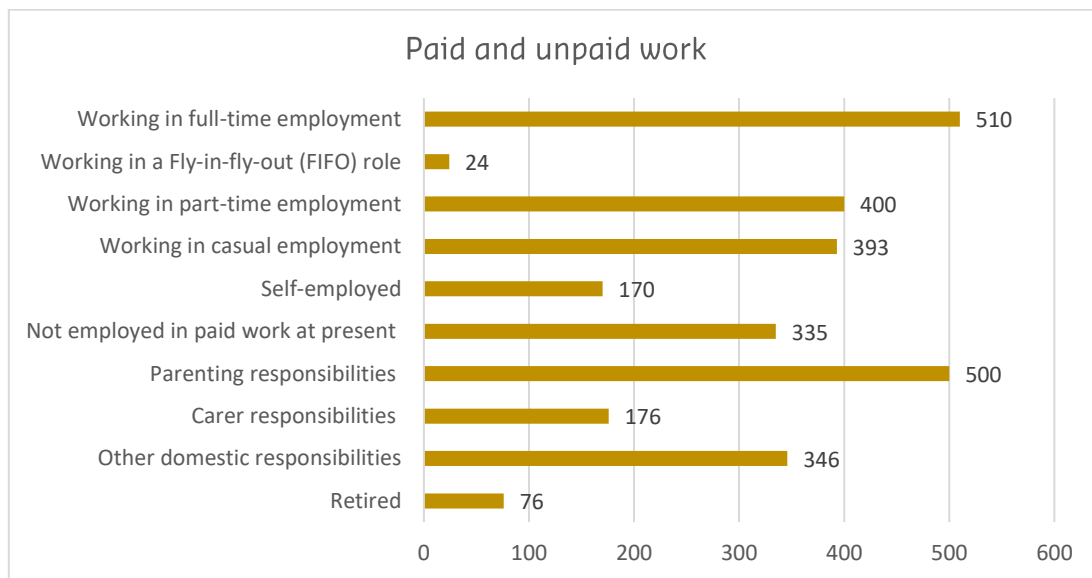
Figure 12. Student survey: work

The majority of respondents (81.3%, n=1,454) were in paid employment: 28.5 per cent (n=510) worked full-time, while 44.4 per cent (n=793) were engaged in part-time or casual work.

This quantitative data reveals a cohort of students who had mostly remained in their regional and remote areas, and who combined commitments, such as work and parenting with their university studies. It is of note that nearly half of the respondents (47.5%, n=848) were the first in their family to undertake university study.

4.2.2. A focus on the online students

Given that more than half of the survey respondents studied online and the national student data also revealed a prevalence of online study amongst mature-aged students in regional and remote areas, associations were explored to find out more about the characteristics of the online students. The following associations were found:

- A significant association was found between a student's study mode and type of attendance. Online students were more likely to be studying part-time (72.1%) compared with on-campus students (26.1%) or students who studied a mix of on-campus/online (42.1%) ($\chi^2(2) = 278.55$, $p<0.001$).
- A significant association was also found between study mode and full-time work. Online students were more likely to work full-time (43.1%) compared with on-campus students (8.0%) or students who studied a mix of on-campus/online (16.4%) ($\chi^2(8) = 282.29$, $p<0.001$).
- There was a significant association between study mode and remoteness with a larger proportion of online students based in outer regional, remote, and very remote areas ($\chi^2(8) = 47.73$, $p<0.001$).
- An association was found between study mode and First-in-Family, with First-in-Family students being more likely to study online ($\chi^2(2) = 6.60$, $p=0.04$).

Main points

These results reveal that the online students were more likely to study part-time, work full-time, live in outer regional, remote and very remote areas; in addition, First-in-Family students were more likely to study online.

4.3. Student survey and student interview data (qualitative findings)

4.3.1. Diversity and complexity

The individual stories of the 51 student interview participants show diversity of experiences, with, in many cases, complex circumstances.[23] Mature-aged students in (and from) regional and remote Australia are far from being one homogenous group. There is diversity in the characteristics of students' locations; their ages; living and working arrangements; and the commitments and responsibilities they manage. This comment from Alice[24] (a mother, partner and part-time worker) describes her commitments and when she found the time for her studies:

> *I work part-time at the golf club here, in the bar. I have a six-year-old boy and a three-and-a-half-year-old girl … I basically did all of my other commitments during the day, and then would have to wait until my children went to bed at night, and then I would study until two in the morning and then go to bed, and get up and do it again the next day. And then, when I had assignments, as soon as my husband came home from work at one, I basically shut the door and just worked until I finished the assignment each day until about two in the morning.* (Alice, Interview 51)

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[23] See Table 16, Appendix E for a compilation of the students' characteristics, challenges and strengths.

[24] Throughout this report, where particular demographic characteristics of an interviewee are necessary to contextualise a specific comment, that information is included. Otherwise, interviewees' demographic details can be cross-referenced with the table in Appendix C.

In addition to three-hour (one-way) trips to attend on-campus classes, Erica (a mother, partner and part-time worker) had parenting responsibilities and worked four days a week:

> I majored in neuroscience and minored in law. So that meant that I had to be in the lab, which meant I had to travel and organise my life around labs. My days at uni were just full-on labs and tutes all day. Mostly I tried to schedule them for after ten o'clock because it could be up to a three-hour drive. … [When I'd get there, I'd] grab a coffee and head straight into whatever lab, and then you might have a lunch break and then it would be another lab or tutorial. And sometimes they would go until six or seven at night, jump in the car and drive home. Yeah, get home, eat food and go to bed. (Erica, Interview 29)

The following comment from interviewee, Bridget (a mother, partner and part-time worker) describes her study environment at home and evokes the juggling required to parent and study. She also worked night shifts.

> [My study] is a tiny desk in [my children's] 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. (Bridget, Interview 12)

Students sought to study for a variety of reasons, including career progression and wanting to change their family's circumstances. For some students, study was a way to manage physical or psychological/emotional pain:

> When I first returned to university, I was extremely fragile mentally. I had just had a traumatic divorce, had been diagnosed with cancer and lost my financial resources. I have no friends, and although I feel lonely at times, I am learning to value myself, for myself, for the first time in my life. (Student Survey)

As the quantitative data revealed, a majority of students studied online and lived in regional or remote areas. A minority of students, however, relocated to a major city or regional centre for their studies, mostly with the intention of returning home upon completion. This physical relocation incurred financial costs. It required developing new circles of friends and support, whilst simultaneously maintaining connections with friends, family and community at home. For some of these students, this involved living in and between two communities, as was described by Jessica (in Interview 7), an Aboriginal student, who spoke of the importance of maintaining connections at home with her family, community, culture and country, and of using available supports and making friends on her city campus.

Mature-aged students in regional and remote areas were often already working, and studied to assist with gaining a career change or promotion. They were often also parenting and supporting their children's learning whilst undertaking their own studies. Other students were less "time poor" and studied for personal growth or to manage life events or physical or mental health conditions. Mature-aged students in (and from) regional and remote Australia is a diverse cohort of students who are simultaneously "everywhere"—spread all over Australia—and "nowhere" — unseen in their communities, often studying alone, in snippets of time early in the morning and late at night or in a library during the day.

4.4. Summary of findings

Notable patterns in the regional and remote student cohort were found from an analysis of the national higher education student data; the more remote the geographical location, the higher the proportion of students who were female, studying online and studying part-time. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students increased with remoteness.

The proportion of students from low SES areas was far higher for the regional and remote locations compared to the metropolitan areas. These pattens were even more pronounced for older students: that is, for students who were aged 21 or older at the commencement of their degree.

The majority of survey respondents (82.0%, n=1,451) remained in their regional/remote location for their university studies; 41.1 per cent (n=728) of the respondents had children under 18 years of age living at home, and 81.3 per cent (n=1,454) of respondents were in paid employment. Further statistical analysis of the survey data revealed that the students who studied online were more likely to study part-time, work full-time, and live in outer regional, remote and very remote areas; in addition, the students who were the first in their family to attend university were more likely to study online.

Mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia is a diverse cohort with varying circumstances. Large numbers of the survey and interview respondents undertook their studies fully online in their regional or remote locations. Smaller numbers relocated from regional or remote areas to major cities, but with the intention of returning home upon completion of their studies. Many students had busy lives balancing their studies with parenting, work and community responsibilities. These students, typically women, carved out the space and time for study in snippets between their other commitments. Other students were less time poor and studying was "their time". Some of these students found that study helped them in their recovery from, or management of, major life events or situations, such as divorce, retirement and, in some cases, homelessness, or physical or mental ill-health (including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder).

Illustration 4. Two worlds25

5. What impacts on the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia?

This section commences with a snapshot of factors that impact on students' mental wellbeing from the quantitative results of the student survey. The factors are numerous and varied, and within and outside students' university environments. It concludes with a summary of the qualitative findings from the student survey (open-ended questions) and student interviews.

5.1. Impacts within the university environment (face-to-face and online)

Survey participants were asked to consider the extent to which specific factors and people (that are related to their course and university) impact on their mental wellbeing. The results are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Impacts related to students' course and university

Factor/people related to students' course and university	Extremely positive & positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Extremely negative & negative (%)	Does not apply to me (%)
1. My university course content	71.6	20.2	7.8	0.3
2. My university study-load	27.2	30.8	41.8	0.2
3. My university assessment tasks	31.2	29.5	39.3	0.1
4. My university face-to-face learning environment	42.2	13.8	7.1	37.0
5. My university online learning environment	55.4	27.7	15.5	1.4
6. My university timetable	35.5	37.8	14.6	12.1
7. My friends (at university)	42.7	16.4	3.3	37.5
8. University teaching staff (e.g. lecturers/tutors)	69.0	22.5	7.6	0.9
9. University support staff (e.g. learning skills advisors/student advisors/counsellors etc.)	53.6	26.3	6.4	13.7
10. University library staff	41.8	29.8	1.3	27.1
11. Services provided by the Student Union/the Student Guild	22.7	36.6	2.6	38.1

The results show that aspects related to the learning experience most influenced the students' mental wellbeing. The factors/people with the highest responses (extremely positive and positive impact) were: a student's university course content (71.6%); and the university teaching staff (for example, lecturers/tutors) (69.0%).

Further analysis investigating associations between variables found no association between the impact of teaching/support staff and students' study mode or with other demographic characteristics. Unsurprisingly, a significant association was found for the factor, "My university online learning environment" with study mode; that is, students who studied online were more likely to have their mental wellbeing positively/extremely positively impacted by their online learning environment ($p<0.001$). Students who studied part-time were also more likely to have their mental wellbeing positively/extremely positively impacted by their online learning environment ($p=0.01$).

The factors for which the most respondents selected extremely negative or negative impact were: a student's university study-load (41.8%); and their university assessment tasks (39.3%).

Main points

- Of the factors related to a student's course and university, course content and teaching staff were reported to have the most positive impacts on student mental wellbeing.
- Of the factors related to a student's course and university, university study load and assessment tasks were reported to have the most negative impacts on student mental wellbeing.

Another survey question consisted of a series of statements to gauge students' perceptions of the importance of their levels of engagement, progress, confidence and competence, along with their feelings of belonging and connections on their mental wellbeing. These statements accord with aspects of psychological needs (described in Section 2). The results are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of factors impacting their mental wellbeing

Statement	Strongly agree & agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Strongly disagree & disagree (%)	Does not apply to me (%)
1. How engaging I find my course impacts on my mental wellbeing.	85.3	11.9	2.6	0.2
2. How relevant I find my course impacts on my mental wellbeing.	84.2	12.8	3.0	0.1
3. The amount of progress I feel I'm making at university impacts on my mental wellbeing.	92.5	5.4	2.1	0.0
4. My level of confidence at university impacts on my mental wellbeing.	89.4	7.3	2.7	0.6
5. My sense of belonging at university impacts on my mental wellbeing.	56.1	27.4	8.9	7.7
6. How competent I feel I am at university impacts on my mental wellbeing.	90.6	6.0	2.6	0.8
7. How connected I feel I am to staff or students at university impacts on my mental wellbeing.	60.0	26.3	8.4	5.3

The highest agree/strongly agree responses were for the three related statements about students' feelings around making progress and of feeling competent and confident:

- The amount of progress I feel I'm making at university impacts on my mental wellbeing. (92.5%)
- How competent I feel I am at university impacts on my mental wellbeing. (90.6%)
- My level of confidence at university impacts on my mental wellbeing. (89.4%)

The next two next highest agree/strongly agree responses focus on the students' course:

- How engaging I find my course impacts on my mental wellbeing. (85.3%)
- How relevant I find my course impacts on my mental wellbeing. (84.2%)

The two statements about "sense of belonging" and how "connected" students feel to staff or students received lower agreement compared to the other statements in this question:

- My sense of belonging at university impacts on my mental wellbeing. (56.1%)
- How connected I feel I am to staff or students at university impacts on my mental wellbeing. (60.0%)

Further analysis that tested for associations between variables revealed that older students (51–60) were more likely to agree/strongly agree with the statement "My sense of belonging at university impacts on my mental wellbeing", while younger mature-aged students (26–30 and 31–40) were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree (p=0.002).[26]

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[26] No other significant associations were found for this question (from cross tabulations and tests performed for gender, age, study mode, type of attendance, Indigeneity, English speaking background, First-in-Family, remoteness, and whether students had studied before).

For the statement, "How connected I feel I am to staff or students at university impacts on my mental wellbeing", there were significant associations with gender, study mode and type of attendance. For instance, females were more likely to report agree/strongly agree ($p=0.03$). Online students ($p<0.001$) and part-time students ($p=0.01$) were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree.

Main points

For the statements about students' perceptions of the importance of their levels of engagement, progress, confidence and competence, and their feelings of belonging and connections, on their mental wellbeing:

- The highest agreement aligns with the psychological needs of growth/competence and purpose.
- The importance students placed on belonging and connections received lower agreement.
- The importance placed on connections with staff or students is significantly associated with gender, study mode, and type of attendance:
  - Male students, online students, and part-time students were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree that feeling connected to staff or students at university impacted on their mental wellbeing.
  - Female students, on-campus students, and full-time students were more likely to agree/strongly agree that feeling connected to staff or students at university impacted on their mental wellbeing.

5.2. Impacts outside the university environment: family, work and caring

Survey participants were asked to consider the extent to which specific factors and people outside of their university studies impact on their mental wellbeing. The results are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Impacts outside of students' course and university

Factor/people outside of students' course and university	Extremely positive & positive impact (%)	Neutral (%)	Extremely negative & negative impact (%)	Does not apply to me (%)
1. My family	68.9	14.4	14.6	2.1
2. My partner/spouse	56.2	8.9	10.2	24.8
3. My friends (outside of university)	68.5	21.8	5.4	4.3
4. Members of my local community	32.7	48.5	3.4	15.5
5. My paid work	36.5	16.4	23.8	23.4
6. Community or volunteering commitments	29.2	25.6	7.0	38.3
7. Parenting responsibilities	18.6	16.1	22.8	42.5
8. Caring responsibilities	15.0	18.9	24.0	42.1

9. My financial situation	13.2	25.9	58.3	2.7
10. Having a HECS debt (Note that HECS = Higher Education Contributions Scheme)	7.8	35.8	42.2	14.3
11. Standard of my accommodation	41.7	25.8	13.0	19.6
12. Availability of public transport	14.4	17.4	15.8	52.4
13. Travel time to my university campus	18.5	18.5	20.5	42.5
14. My access to a computer for my study	65.2	22.6	7.9	4.3
15. Access and reliability of the internet connection I use for my study	58.2	19.7	20.1	2.0
16. The time I spend on social media	10.1	41.8	32.6	15.5

The factors and people for which the most respondents selected extremely positive or positive impact were: the student's family (68.9%) and their friends (outside of university) (68.5%). Further analysis was undertaken to find out more about the small sub-groups of students who identified their family and friends as having a negative/extremely negative impact on their mental wellbeing. A significant association was found with students who had children at home; they were more likely to select negative or extremely negative impact (p=0.001). This could suggest that family (in this case, the students' responsibilities associated with their children) are a stressor. In contrast, students without children at home were more likely to report that their family had a positive/extremely positive impact on their mental wellbeing (p=0.001). Similarly, for the factor, "My friends (outside of university)", a significant association was found with students with children at home; they were more likely to select negative or extremely negative impact (p=0.001). There was also an association with study mode, with a higher proportion of online students selecting negative or extremely negative impact (p=0.04). These results suggest that for people studying while also raising children at home, their family and their friends might not understand what their study involves. The students' family and friends are not likely to be sources of support.

Main points

Family and friends (outside of university) were reported as having a positive or extremely positive impact for the majority of respondents. However,

- online students were more likely to select negative/extremely negative when considering the impact of their friends (outside of university), and
- students with children at home were more likely to select negative/extremely negative when considering the impact of their family and friends (outside of university).

Students with children at home already face challenges. The negative impact of their family and friends suggests that their already challenging situations are potentially exacerbated.

5.3. The semester cycle: temporal considerations

One survey question focused on the different periods within the cycle of a semester to ascertain if some periods were more stressful than others or not stressful at all.

Table 6. The semester cycle

Statement	Strongly agree / agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Strongly disagree / disagree (%)	Does not apply to me (%)
1. The enrolment and orientation period was stressful for me.	26.7	14.7	56.5	2.2
2. The first week of semester is stressful for me.	29.7	13.1	56.4	0.8
3. The time period just before assignments are due is stressful for me.	89.3	5.4	5.3	0.1
4. The final weeks of semester are stressful for me.	78.2	9.9	11.6	0.3
5. School holiday periods that fall during semester time are stressful for me.	31.1	17.8	36.8	14.3
6. The examination period is stressful for me.	70.5	8.8	6.5	14.2

The responses to the series of statements highlight the temporal nature of stress with some periods of time within a semester being more stressful than others. Unsurprisingly, the highest agree/strongly agree responses were for the time just before assignments were due and the final weeks of semester. School holiday periods were a stressful time for a large minority of students (36.8%), as were the pre-semester/orientation periods and the first week of semester.

5.4. Students who considered deferring or withdrawing: how many and why

The survey question, "This year, have you considered deferring (i.e. taking time off) or withdrawing from your university course?", was posed with the reasoning that to consider deferring/withdrawing a student is likely to have been experiencing unmanageable stress and feeling that they were not coping with their studies and other commitments.

- Almost half of the respondents (47.7%, n=883) considered deferring/withdrawing from their university course.

Further analysis to find which sub-groups of students were more likely to consider withdrawing/deferring revealed significant associations with disability, health, study mode and type of attendance, as follows:

- Students with disability were more likely to consider deferring/withdrawing ($p<0.001$).
- Students with a medical condition were more likely to consider deferring/withdrawing ($p<0.001$).
- Students with a diagnosed mental health condition were more likely to consider deferring/withdrawing ($p<0.001$).
- Online students were more likely to consider deferring/withdrawing ($p=0.03$).

- Part-time students were more likely to consider deferring/withdrawing (p=0.001).

Further associations were investigated for this question with variables (other statements in the survey) to gain more of an understanding of the experiences of the students who considered deferring/withdrawing. As outlined in Table 17 (in Appendix F), the students who were more likely to consider deferring/withdrawing, were students who:

- found the teaching environment stressful (p<0.001)
- did not feel included in the teaching and learning environment (p<0.001)
- did not have social connections with other students in their course (p<0.001).

The students who considered deferring/withdrawing (n=883) were asked the reasons why; they could select as many reasons as were applicable to them from a drop-down menu of 25 reasons. The top 10 reasons (excluding "other") are presented in Figure 13.

Top 10 reasons why students considered deferring/withdrawing (%)

Reason	%
Stress	65.6
Feeling overwhelmed by my university study-load	55.4
Mental health difficulties	43.8
I couldn't fit study in with my other commitments	43.0
Financial difficulties	33.9
To spend more time in paid work	28.8
I didn't feel smart enough.	26.5
To focus on my children	26.0
Poor physical health	21.0
Illness of a family member or friend	19.0

Figure 13. Top 10 reasons why students consider deferring/withdrawing

These top 10 reasons show the range of factors from personal, family, university-related and outside the university. The top two reasons were: stress (65.6%, n=579) and feeling overwhelmed by their university study-load (55.4%, n=489).

Main points

- 47.7 per cent (n=883) of the respondents considered deferring/withdrawing.
- The following sub-groups were more likely to consider deferring/withdrawing:
  - students with disability
  - students with a medical condition
  - students with a mental health condition
  - students who studied online
  - students who studied part-time
  - students who found the teaching environment stressful
  - students who did not feel included in the teaching and learning environment
  - students who did not have social connections with other students in their course.
- Stress and feeling overwhelmed by their university study-load were the top two reasons why students considered deferring/withdrawing.

5.5. Qualitative findings: students' experiences

This section focuses on students' experiences and feelings about what impacts on their mental wellbeing within the university environment, as well as practical and financial issues. As highlighted in Section 4, mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas were more likely to be women, studying online and part-time; many juggled parenting, work and other commitments. The qualitative data are divided into the following interrelated categories:

1. invisible, misunderstood and undervalued
2. juggling and balancing acts
3. teaching and learning: course and curriculum design
4. teaching and learning: assessment tasks
5. teaching and learning: the online student experience
6. teaching and learning: teaching staff (lecturers and tutors)
7. preparation and provisioning
8. studying in a regional/remote area: practical issues and natural disasters
9. financial issues.

The first category about invisibility is an overarching theme that threads through the other categories; for instance, students' feelings of invisibility were experienced in relation to the course and curriculum design, assessment tasks and the online learning experience. While this theme was relevant for a lot of participants, it is also the case that other participants felt visible and known, as is evident in some of the counter-narratives and positive impacts of small actions by staff presented in this section.

5.5.1. Invisible, misunderstood and undervalued

Students' comments suggest feelings of invisibility in their university environments (both face-to-face and online); some students felt that their life experiences, perspectives and contributions were not valued. The following quote from interviewee Amelia (an online student who attended on-campus practicals at a campus far from home, and who also worked and studied full-time) evokes this sense of invisibility due to distance from the main campus:

You notice the further you move away from uni… you get forgotten about a little bit. You don't get as much assistance with your studies and things like that, and people checking in when you're on campus and that, to see how you're going and how you're actually juggling everything. (Amelia, Interview 15)

Other students felt ignored and even unworthy of being a university student, and some felt patronised:

I feel mature aged students are not being sufficiently recognised in the Tertiary system, young students are acknowledged and listened to while I felt ignored in most classes at University, and just tolerated, my contributions were not appreciated most of the time, but not in all classes. I think mature aged students have a lot to contribute to learning from life experiences and maturity and this needs to be acknowledged more for remote students especially who have other commitments such as family and work. (Student Survey)

It would be a start if the universities actually acknowledged there are older students studying on their courses, and stopped pretending that we don't exist or we are being difficult when we raise issues to do with being an older student. It is really patronizing when this happens. There is no pride in having older students on our course, in fact one of the lecturers actually said overtly that they wished to recruit more younger students. Older students are good for the money but the unis don't really want us on the courses, we are there but they wish we weren't and this is also reflected in how we are treated on clinical placement relative to younger students. (Student Survey)

These students perceived that not only were they invisible in the sense of not feeling acknowledged or listened to in class, but they indicated that there was a lack of recognition of what they brought and contributed in the university environment, as well as the often challenging circumstances they dealt with in their personal lives whilst managing their studies.

Furthermore, some students did not recognise themselves in the university marketing material or on their university's social media sites, which further impacted on their sense of belonging, as articulated in the following comment: "Most if not all of the promotion literature and website content contains mostly pictures of young women and no photos of older men and women. I understand why but it makes me feel like I don't really belong." (Student Survey)

5.5.2. Juggling and balancing acts

Numerous survey and interview participants emphasised the multiple commitments they juggled, including study, children, work and community:

Just an understanding that we work, we raise children, we support our husbands, we have interests outside of university also. As well, an understanding of the challenges that come with all those things. (Student Survey)

Many mature age people come to university with young children, and although many lecturers also have young children, they forget that just switching times for classes or the preparation required for class can cause undue stress on these people as to be prepared for class, you have had to prepare well ahead of time. (Student Survey)

In the second comment, the student alludes to university changes (for example, to class times) creating situations that were stressful, and thus detrimental to their mental wellbeing. Furthermore, the juggling and balancing were often not appreciated, considered or taken into

account, which added to feelings of not belonging or being understood. The balancing act required around the time that assignments were due was also noted as a difficult time for students, especially for students managing children, work and community responsibilities.

5.5.3. Teaching and learning: course and curriculum design

> *A very large amount of students at my uni don't fit the standard school leavers cohort, but you would never know it from the materials, activities etc promoted. This makes mature aged students feel disconnected, unacknowledged, unappreciated in their uni life.* (Student Survey)

Another aspect of the invisibility theme is related to course and curriculum design. Students' remarks indicate a perception that courses were designed for students *not* like them: that is, for students who were younger (for example, a school leaver), studied on-campus, full-time and in a metropolitan or urban area. Not fitting this type of profile, the students in this study reported finding that aspects of their courses did not have their interests, experiences and future aims in mind; this situation impacted on their level of engagement, and, furthermore, led, in some cases, to students feeling undervalued, alone and invisible.

In contrast, when teaching and learning materials, learning activities and assessment tasks were designed through the lens of a diverse student cohort, the materials were more likely to be relevant, engaging and inclusive. For instance, one interviewee spoke about her assessment tasks being contextualised for the rural area in which she lived and planned to work after her studies. The materials and tasks were highly relevant to her; furthermore, she felt her university, which was located on the other side of the country, knew who she was, as well as what her needs were to achieve her future plans.

5.5.4. Teaching and learning: assessment tasks

The survey results indicated that 39.3 per cent of respondents found that assessment tasks impacted extremely negatively or negatively on their mental wellbeing. Similarly, assessment tasks were a major theme in the qualitative data. The interviews indicated that students did not always understand what was required in a task, could experience stress, found group assessments challenging; and also had practical concerns around deadlines. For example, Lara (an online student) expressed that a challenge throughout her several years of part-time study was unclear assessment tasks:

> *One thing that I find very difficult, and I know I'm not alone in this: the wording of a lot of the assessment tasks has really managed to get a lot of us confused. In fact, even just in the very last assessment task that I did, the wording was sort of a bit vague, and so, certain students took it to mean one thing and other students took it to mean another, and I found that, all the way along, the wording for the assessment tasks can actually sometimes be very unclear.* (Lara, Interview 2)

Lara's experience was also a theme in the qualitative data in the student survey, as illustrated by the following comment:

> *The assessment task was poorly written by the tutors and it affected my grade. I felt like I was doing what they wanted and it turned out to be wrong.* (Student Survey)

Gertrude (an online student) described her poor emotional state around assessment due dates, and attributed it to not knowing whether she was fulfilling the requirements of the task:

> *My friend at the time could tell when I had a due date due because I would be very teary and I would be crying just before I was going to put something in. Because I was, you know, you had no idea how you were going. There was no way to evaluate whether you're doing well, whether you're doing crap, whether*

you're doing marvellously fantastic. Even though you're putting in all this work.
(Gertrude, Interview 28)

Students' comments such as these signalled that the language of assessment in higher education can be quite foreign for mature-aged students. Another illustration of this point is a student who spoke of not knowing what a rubric was, which demonstrates how such everyday language of university study can function as a barrier to students who are unfamiliar with such terms. These comments point to the importance of making the assessment language more accessible to all students, and for universities to provide clear guides about common terms.

Due dates for multiple assessment tasks scheduled around the same time was a common challenge. This situation was exacerbated for mature-aged students who juggled work, family and community commitments or who worked fly-in-fly-out (FIFO). As a result, numerous comments in the student survey noted difficulties, but also offered strategies for overcoming the challenge.

> *Where possible in normal enrolment patterns have courses that are offered together set assignments at different times so that you are not trying to complete all of the assignments for a semester at the same time.* (Student Survey)

> *I also had 3 large assessments all due on the same day which not only effected my mental state but made me feel very alone.* (Student Survey)

> *Move assignment due dates for FIFO workers so that the assignments aren't due on the last day of their swing. I had 3 assignments all due on the last day of swing this semester. Working 12-16 hour days and trying to finish assignments on top of that is really hard to do whilst maintaining quality at work. Especially for those of us in high risk work.* (Student Survey)

A particular challenge for students with children was the timing of multiple assessment tasks and/or exams falling during or immediately after school holidays, making this a stressful period.

> *I know it's a university, but a bit more flexibility (re assignments) when it comes to full time shift workers, school holidays etc - most of my assignments were due at end of school holidays.* (Student Survey)

Survey comments also described release of content dates and quiz deadlines that were not inclusive of students who worked full-time, Monday to Friday. For instance, a student noted that their weekly material was released on a Monday and the quiz on the content was on the Friday of the same week; given they relied on having weekends to do their study, this Monday-Friday arrangement added unnecessary stress that a Monday-Monday (or another seven-day cycle) would avoid and be more equitable. Some similar difficulties included participation expectations and assessment deadlines:

> *Participation timelines [are] often unmanageable. Due dates at 5pm on a Friday is not manageable for someone who works full time and is mature aged juggling family / relationships. I need to finish things by the previous weekend, so feel like I have a week less time than other students - inequitable. I also travel for my work, so often opportunity for weekday study is not possible - and inflexible participation activities, do not allow for catch ups.* (Student Survey)

Another concern, for both on-campus and online students, was group assignments:

> *Group assessments are very difficult to do as an online student and should not be included as an assessment tool for online students. Particularly as internal students get a lot of hands on/face to face help from the lecturer/tutors that does*

not extend to online students, so we are at a disadvantage in completing the task as well as potentially losing marks due to this. We are unable to get together as a group due to our varied locations, which makes it even harder to complete a group assessment. Just take away the group assessments!! (Student Survey)

Let us be exempt from "group" assignments. They are so hard to manage with millennial aged students. (Student Survey)

Group assignments can also be an issue, especially if some members are not mature age and prefer to cram the night before. I find mature age group members much more efficient at getting a task done and tend to be very clear about their availability and deadlines. (Student Survey)

Many comments made the same point about the difficulties of group assignments, particularly for students who also had work and parenting commitments, and, thus, had very little time to attend group meetings on-campus. Age difference was also noted as a challenge for group assignments, as were internet connections (for group meetings via video conference), particularly for online students, and time zone differences. No evidence was found in the open-ended survey question responses or interview transcripts of students being in favour of group assessment tasks. There were, however, some examples of students, particularly in on-campus contexts, who benefited from camaraderie and support from their peer group (which is elaborated on in Section 6.4).

A positive experience of assessment tasks was noted by a student who appreciated having choice: "there have been a few assignments that have had multiple options which is a great idea!" (Student Survey). This is an example of flexibility provided in the form of multiple options for assessment tasks.

5.5.5. Teaching and learning: the online student experience

The quantitative findings, reported earlier in this section, highlighted the difficulties experienced by students who studied online. Supporting these findings, many comments made by the participants who studied online included perceptions that they missed out, were forgotten and were not at the forefront of the lecturer/teacher's mind in their online delivery:

Online students get forgotten repeatedly when lecture materials, recordings or tutes are either not made available or posted not in a timely manner. (Student Survey)

The lectures get cut off but often the lecturers keep talking. We don't have tutorials and it seems like the students who do have tutorials get so much more education than us. (Student Survey)

Simon (an online student who had formerly studied on-campus) articulated the incidental interactions and communication with teaching staff and peers that he perceived he missed out on in the online environment:

There was a lot of communication that happens in the classroom that isn't online, I guess. All the lectures are recorded, but there's also things that before the class, after the class that you miss as an online student. (Simon, Interview 11)

Some students' comments revealed inconsistencies in the layout and design of the Learning Management System (LMS), which resulted in students needing to familiarise themselves with the layout for each unit/subject of study, rather than becoming familiar with one unit's formatting and transferring that information to other units throughout their course. This situation created unnecessary complexity and stress for students at the fundamental level of navigating the LMS for materials, prior to any engagement and learning being able to take place.

Receiving timely and clear answers to questions, particularly about assessment tasks with impending deadlines, was a major concern for online students. On the whole, the online student comments showed an understanding that answers to their questions (asked via email or on the LMS discussion boards) would take one to two days, but, nevertheless, they were acutely aware of missing out on "real time" responses experienced by their on-campus counterparts, as illustrated in the following comments:

> *And, of course, you're not in a classroom situation where you can stick your hand up and say, "Look, this isn't making a lot of sense." So, then you've got to go onto the discussion boards and sort of say, "Look, I really am not getting this." They're very good at replying, but usually, it takes 48 hours, which is, of course, fine, but it's just that the task descriptions aren't always very clear.* (Lara, Interview 2)

> *I find my biggest struggle is not knowing exactly what is expected in terms of assessments, and feeling like I'm on the wrong track. Also in some units, being an online student you have the disadvantage of not physically being in a lecture where you can see things and ask questions in real time.* (Student Survey)

The following description from Alice (an online student) evokes the frustration of waiting for answers to pressing questions:

> *That is 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 from one of the teachers.* (Alice, Interview 51)

Unsurprisingly, students found assessment tasks and the period leading up to the due dates stressful, as reported in the student survey (see Table 6 above). Their stress was exacerbated when the task was unclear and when clarification was not received or was not timely. Online students, in particular, could spend days in limbo – not knowing how to approach a task and waiting for a response from a lecturer or tutor online, while the time was ticking away and the deadline was quickly approaching.

Online students who had also studied on-campus had an awareness of the types of informal teacher-to-student and peer-to-peer communication that they, as online students, missed out on, such as: while the lecturer/tutor was setting up their classroom prior to the lecture or tutorial commencing; during break time; and "corridor" conversations that occurred while students were waiting to enter a classroom. These incidental interactions are not only a time and place where students learn about the academic culture and course requirements from each other and make connections, they are also important opportunities to seek clarifications about their assessment tasks from their lecturer/tutor.

There was, however, a positive counter-narrative. Online students who had access to a DESE-funded Regional University Centre[27] praised these centres for the face-to-face academic and emotional support they received, as well as for providing them with a place to study with up-to-date computers and software, and free and fast internet.

> *I utilise Country Universities Centre which assists in providing a stress-free environment with computers, printing, Wi-Fi, kitchen/bathroom facilities that is free of charge for all enrolled university students in the area. An added bonus is that many of the students are mature students facing similar work/life/study*

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[27] The Regional University Centres were formally known as Regional Study Hubs, until late 2019. They are known as Country Universities Centres (CUCs) in New South Wales.

balance stressors, which allows for solidarity and support despite the variance in courses/universities represented at the study centre. (Student Survey)

Some online students benefited from opportunities to connect with other students and staff face-to-face; such as through accessing Regional University Centres or regional university campuses. An anomaly was one interviewee who could not access a local Regional University Centre because she was studying a course at a university not supported by the local centre.

5.5.6. Teaching and learning: teaching staff (lecturers and tutors)

A salient theme in the qualitative data analysis is the role and impact on student mental wellbeing, both positive and negative, of teaching staff – lecturers and tutors. Relatively small actions by staff, such as a lecturer or tutor replying to a student's email or responding to their post on a discussion forum, were favourably regarded by students. Students' comments revealed that they were not seeking special treatment from lecturers or university staff, and that they also acknowledged their heavy workloads. They noticed and appreciated their small actions. Gertrude (an online student) praised teaching staff who through small actions created connections:

> *Yeah, the lecturers, of course, provided academic support, but the ones that I'm commending, if you like, are the ones that managed to infuse the human connection as well. You know, it was ... yeah. And they're the ones that stand out, you know, whether it was a "good on you" or just one line, do you know what I mean, like, it makes such a difference.* (Gertrude, Interview 28)

In the following comment, the student articulates the positive impact of a lecturer checking in with them via email:

> *I had one lecturer who noticed I had stopped logging into the zoom sessions and missed an assessment deadline (I ended up a day late). He emailed to ensure everything was ok and if I needed help. Knowing I had the support was amazing and he was very understanding in my situation.* (Student Survey)

Beverley (an online student) appreciated the prompt responses and encouragement from one of her teachers:

> *There's one tutor who's written a couple of courses, and they are excellent, and she's excellent. She's always prompt with responding to you. She's always very clear and concise about what's required. Always encouraging, you know.* (Beverley, Interview 39)

Particularly in the case of online students, teaching staff (often a tutor) were their only contact with the university; they were their teacher (lecturer/tutor), support and face of the university. Some students indicated that without them they would have been unlikely to persist with their studies.

> *The difference between a good subject and a bad one can be the commitment and availability shown by the lecturer to really help you if you need it.* (Student Survey)

Having little or no contact from teaching staff was also noted:

> *I feel like if teachers were more available it would improve everyone's mental health. At uni you don't know your lecturer then you don't know who's marking your assignments. You feel faceless and like no one really values you as a person.* (Student Survey)

In this comment, the student makes a direct link between mental health and having a relational connection to their lecturers/tutors. This underscores the importance of teaching staff in higher education being aware of their potential to impact students' wellbeing. This comment also reveals that the student takes their assessment tasks seriously and personally, and that in giving something of themselves in their task, they would feel more valued if they knew the person marking their work. This is another example of the everyday experiences of students in their learning environment, such as doing an assessment task, that have the potential to impact on their mental wellbeing.

The following comment reveals the difference that one act by one tutor (out of 19) made for this student; they were then willing to seek help:

> *I think tutors sending out a quick email to just touch base and make sure that you are handling the unit/assignments ok is very valuable. I only had one unit tutor do this out of nineteen, but that simple check in and asking if I needed help - really helped me and made me willing to ask them.* (Student Survey)

The survey results (in Section 6.2) indicate that students often managed their studies on their own; some sub-groups within the target group (for example, students who did not have a supportive peer group or someone to turn to at university) were more likely not to ask family or friends for help. As the following comment shows, some students tried very hard to solve their problems without seeking 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.* (Student Survey)

This student makes a link between not asking for help and ending up stressed. Such comments show the importance of tutors and lecturers checking in with students to offer help or link them to the Student Support Services (see Section 6.3). If a lecturer/tutor is not accessible or proactive in checking in with students, some will not get the help they need. This underscores the importance of teaching staff in higher education being aware of their potential to impact upon students' mental wellbeing. Small actions by university staff can have a positive impact on students' mental wellbeing. The simple act of checking in with a student and asking if they are okay opens students to the possibility of seeking help.

5.5.7. Preparation and provisioning

Mature-aged students, by definition, have had a gap of several years or even decades since they were in an educational setting. Their prior educational environment may have had a very different culture and expectations compared to their new academic culture. Hence, while it is often exciting for students to embark upon a university course, it can also be overwhelming until students become familiar with the new academic culture and its expectations, and learn how to navigate the systems (online and/or on-campus) and develop or refresh the numerous academic literacies required for university study. The following comments reveal students' thoughts about preparedness for university:

> *I think it is critical in the very first semester of uni study for a mature age student to be given the tools to establish the new routine that is tertiary study and to be able to easily navigate and find things on the uni website (especially if they will be in an online environment). That first semester experience will weigh heavily as to how and if they continue their course of study. Before commencing study with [a regional university] I actually did a "get ready for tertiary study" course for mature age students … this was very helpful on how to use PC, the internet, Boolean search commands, using memory sticks for making info portable etc.* (Student Survey)

Academic Skill support has been paramount [and] I did the Academic Skills course prior to commencing University and that was fantastic! (Student Survey)

Some students noted the challenges they had upon commencing at university with navigating the LMS, their university's systems and online library. For example, one student commented that she took longer to upload her first assessment task on the LMS than she did to write it.

Students recalled how difficult it was at the beginning of their course, and how they needed reinforcement of "simple" tasks. Some also noted how advantageous it was to undertake university preparation programs (also known as enabling programs):

I can only speak for myself but I feel that if you are mature aged and it has been a considerable while since you have studied for your senior year, I believe that it should be mandatory that you do a University Preparation course. There are many things I had to learn just to be able to do my assessments.
(Student Survey)

Some universities held orientation days specifically for mature-aged students, which were pointed out as an opportunity to meet and connect with students who were in a similar position. In the case of the interviewee, Judy (Interview 34), who studied on-campus in a major city two hours away from her home, she maintained a friendship from this workshop throughout her degree. The provision of support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, in the form of a centre for Indigenous studies, was noted by Jessica (Interview 7), who relocated to a major city to undertake her studies on-campus, as providing her with invaluable supports from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students that made going to university possible.

Attending university requires that students understand "the game" (that is, the academic culture; the language of assessment; how to reference sources etc.). Students also need to have the "equipment to play the game" and to know "how to use it". The qualitative data found that a lot of the students did not arrive at university with the numerous academic literacies and skills, and the social and cultural capitals required to succeed in the academic environment, which can add stress to the first year, in particular.

5.5.8. Studying in a regional/remote area: practical issues and natural disasters

Timetabling

Some students in regional areas chose to enrol as on-campus students because they desired face-to-face delivery and its related benefits of contact with peers and teaching staff, as well as access to support staff, the university library facilities and study spaces, which included access to computers and the internet. Some students also perceived that studying online would be more difficult for them than on-campus. However, for students who selected to be on-campus, in some cases university timetables were found to result in poor use of students' already scarce time, particularly for those who juggled children and work, and/or had vast distances to travel to their campus for compulsory classes, such as tutorials or laboratory sessions. The following comments express some of these concerns:

Sometimes my timetable will spread out my classes so I am traveling 2 hours for one tutorial when I prefer to bunch my classes together so save on the amount of time I am traveling. (Student Survey)

Take into consideration the amount of time people have to spend traveling from these areas and be willing to have tutorials on one day or two days back to back to help minimize driving back and forth. I have to travel for 2 hours each way for

every trip to uni 4 hours of traveling in a day is very tiring and it costs a lot in petrol to drive and/or stay at accommodation. (Student Survey)

For those mature aged students who are parents, there needs to be more flexibility in tutorial times. At least one option for during the day and one for evening tutorials should be available for each course so we have the choice of when suits us best for engagement. (Student Survey)

The practice of allocating students' tutorial times via an online booking system forms a logistical function; it saves time for staff on administration. However, it is not necessarily an equitable system. Students who lived far from campus and who missed out on selecting their preferred tutorial/laboratory time (due to that time being fully booked) faced the prospect of constantly being late to class or unable to attend (for example, due to having to drop children at school on the way). In some courses, this resulted in the student losing attendance marks or gaining a reputation for being tardy and unconscientious. Some frustration was expressed with the timetable allocations:

Offer access to preferred timetables instead of being pot luck with everyone else and then being given horrible timetables that require so much extra travel when there are people on campus who get everything fit all in one day. (Student Survey)

One interviewee, Erica (Interview 29), spoke of driving three and a half hours one way for her classes. In her first semester, she had a 9 am start as that was the only time left in the online tutorial booking system. Later in her course, as she got to know staff and they understood her circumstances, she was allocated a later tutorial time. Such incidents require human intervention with the online tutorial booking system in order to accommodate all students equitably.

Placements and practicals

Courses such as nursing and education require students to spend a certain number of weeks (in specific years of their course) on placements or practicals in schools and hospitals or on residentials at universities to undertake practical components of their course. The logistics and organisation around the placements were challenging for some students, and they were made even more so when students were placed far from home. Such situations required students to find accommodation in a different town, which meant, for some, paying rent for two places. It was challenging in regard to caring for children and often required family and community support for students to manage the logistical aspects of their placement. The following comments highlight some of the students' experiences with placements and practicals:

Provide more opportunities for students to stay local during placements. Especially as a single parent, it is extremely stressful when placements can be a plane trip away - then to also have to manage shift work with childcare in an unknown town = virtually impossible. (Student Survey)

My first placement required me to be 9 hours from home for four weeks while my daughter had a bullying incident at school. This is expensive and prohibits mature age access to higher education. (Student Survey)

My prac. last year added up to five weeks. Five weeks of prac. …. Yeah, so that's quite difficult. That does add a lot of stress to my family. Like, my kids, I feel, really suffer. Because I, like, I'm very lucky that this year I've managed to, I am living in town. So, I'm not driving back and forth every day, which isn't really safe. …. My kids are at home on the farm. I missed my youngest son's first day at kindy, because I was at prac and 100 kilometres away. (Olivia, Interview 26)

Placements and practicals that required relocation also placed a financial and emotional burden on the students and their families, as illustrated in the quote above from Olivia.

Internet access and reliability, and students' "workarounds"

As noted earlier in the analysis of the national student data, high proportions of mature-aged students in regional and remote areas were likely to study online, and more than half of the survey respondents studied online. Online study assumes that students have access to computers and reliable internet with bandwidth that enables them to participate in synchronous online learning activities, such as video conferencing or streaming of lectures. It also assumes that students can afford the internet services or can access them at a campus or community library or at their friends' or family's homes.

Despite the national rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN), it is still the case that numerous students in regional and remote Australia do not have reliable internet. It is often these students who, due to their geographical location, were most in need of reliable internet in order to study online; for these students, unreliable internet had a negative impact.

> *Internet issues can be frustrating and not being able to have face to face discussions in regard to technical problems encountered while learning new programs for assignments etc. is exacerbated by older age and isolation.* (Student Survey)

> *It's just my internet drops in and out. So, you know, if I'm uploading something, my internet comes, my internet goes. I'm in regional Victoria, we don't have NBN. So there's a lot of assumptions as to access to the internet that I don't meet. I don't meet those assumptions. And that's a regional Victorian kind of issue.* (Carlo, Interview 35)

> *Sometimes, yeah, I've had no internet, so, obviously, I can't do anything, which is a little bit stressful.* (Simone, Interview 38)

The comments presented above highlight the students' frustrations and stress. The quantitative results found that poor internet access impacted to the extent that a small number of students (n=76) considered withdrawing or deferring from their course. Others, however, sought "workarounds" to their internet problems.

A sub-narrative in numerous interviews was about how and where the students accessed their course materials. Many students noted that they had the NBN at home and thought it was "pretty good" after initial issues were resolved. However, when asked if they listened to their lectures from home, the responses revealed that their internet access and/or bandwidth was not reliable/large enough to do so. These students had "workarounds". One student, Carolyn (Interview 1), would drive 45 minutes from her farm to a nearby town to access free Wi-Fi at McDonald's in order to submit her assignments. She was also well prepared and downloaded her reading material (for example, journal articles) at times when the internet was working, to work on her assignments at a later date offline. Another student, Olivia (Interview 26), relied on free high-speed internet at a Regional University Centre 80 kilometres away or at a local community library in a small town 20 kilometres away.

Natural disasters and volunteering

Even before the recent 2019/20 unprecedented bushfire season, some students in this study had been experiencing drought, floods, and other natural disasters. When surveyed in 2019, 36 students indicated that they had considered withdrawing/deferring due to the drought, bushfires or floods.

The extent to which students' experiences in natural disasters were acknowledged and extensions granted were mixed; some students had supportive teaching staff and received extensions without question, while others, as outlined in the following quotation, did not:

> *Appreciate that for some of us, our commitment to local emergency service volunteering in our community is not something we can simply drop during exam periods or when working on major assignments, as we are often the only people available to respond in our local communities. As a volunteer firefighter, I have had to request assignment extensions several times due to major bush fires, motor vehicle accidents, or medical emergencies which have resulted in lost time, as I don't want my high GPA, which I worked hard to achieve, to be slashed due to late submission penalties. Most of the time extension requests are denied, and the response is along the lines of "you could have chosen not to go, you need to make better choices in the future". I feel like sending that reply on to the families of the people I went to help, to let them know how little [the University] cares about the community.* (Student Survey)

Some students had a mix of experiences within their university. For example, during bushfires, one interviewee sought extensions for their assignments because their children's childcare provision became unavailable. One lecturer approved the extension request, while another denied it, indicating that this was insufficient grounds for an extension. In addition to it being stressful for the student, there was a clear inconsistency within the university about its assessment policy in the time of a natural disaster. A footnote to this incident is that soon after the university issued a "blanket authorisation" for assignment extensions due to the bushfires occurring at that time.

5.5.9. Financial issues

The survey results showed that finances were a major negative impact on students. More than half of the survey respondents (58.3%) reported their financial situation impacted extremely negatively or negatively on their mental wellbeing (see Table 5). The following comment evokes a student's frustration at managing financial costs incurred from relocating from a regional area to a major city for their university studies:

> *I think it boils down to an unequal opportunity between remote and city students. Programs like the student subsidised travel scheme help, but agencies like Centrelink make it a nightmare to try and get any financial support for just covering rent or food. … I'm fortunate my university does its best to accommodate everyone, and really does push a positive message of mental health and wellbeing for all students. However, Government policy needs to be more geared into bridging the distances between places that aren't in a metro area.* (Student Survey)

Similarly, the following comment highlights the financial stress experienced by a student who relocated from a rural area to a university in another state:

> *The majority of my stress arises from financial difficulties. As I am a mature aged student from a rural area, I don't have the opportunity to live at home while studying (like most of my younger classmates) and I had to move interstate. University scholarships often a) don't allow mature aged students to apply … this means financial support is often out of reach for me. Secondly, my university does not timetable classes effectively - often I have a class every day (even if it's only for an hour) when it could be easily condensed into 2 and a half days. This really affects my ability to work to support myself and has forced me to consider dropping out repeatedly.* (Student Survey)

Financial stress was also highlighted in regard to travel costs incurred from driving vast distances to campuses for compulsory classes and/or for placements and practicals.

Main points

Students' experiences and feelings about what impacted on their mental wellbeing highlight the importance of the several aspects of the learning experience, as well as practical and financial issues. A summary of the key findings of Section 5.5 are as follows:

- Invisible, misunderstood and undervalued
  - Students' comments suggest feelings of invisibility in their university environments (both face-to-face and online); some students felt that their life experiences, perspectives and contributions were not valued; others felt ignored and even unworthy of being a university student, and some felt patronised.
- Juggling and balancing acts
  - Numerous survey and interview participants emphasised the multiple commitments they juggled, including study, children, work and community. The juggling and balancing were often not appreciated, considered or taken into account, which added to feelings of not belonging and not being understood.
- Teaching and learning: course and curriculum design
  - Another aspect of the invisibility theme is related to course and curriculum design. Students reported finding that aspects of their courses did not have their interests, experiences and future aims in mind; this situation impacted on their level of engagement, and, furthermore, led to some students feeling undervalued, alone and invisible.
  - In contrast, when teaching and learning materials, learning activities and assessment tasks were designed through the lens of a diverse student cohort, students found the materials relevant, engaging and inclusive. For example, one interviewee spoke about her assessment tasks being contextualised for the rural area in which she lived and planned to work in after her studies.
- Teaching and learning: assessment tasks
  - Students did not always understand what was required in a task, experienced stress, found group assessments challenging, and also had practical concerns around deadlines.
- Teaching and learning: the online student experience
  - Many comments made by the participants who studied online included perceptions that they missed out, were forgotten and were not at the forefront of the lecturer/teacher's mind in their online delivery. Receiving timely and clear answers to questions, particularly about assessment tasks with impending deadlines, was a major concern for online students, as was missing out on incidental and informal teacher-to-student and peer-to-peer communication.
  - However, a positive counter-narrative was expressed by some online students who could access a physical space, such as a Regional University Centre; these students benefited from face-to-face academic and emotional support, as well as from having access to a place to study with up-to-date computers and software, and free and fast internet.

- Teaching and learning: teaching staff (lecturers and tutors)
  - A salient theme in the qualitative data analysis is the role and impact on student mental wellbeing, both positive and negative, of teaching staff – lecturers and tutors.
  - Small actions by university staff can have a positive impact on students' mental wellbeing.
  - The simple act of checking in with a student and asking if they are okay opens students to the possibility of seeking help.
  - These aforementioned points underscore the importance of teaching staff in higher education being aware of their potential to impact on students' mental wellbeing.
- Preparation and provisioning
  - The qualitative analysis found that a lot of the students did not arrive at university with the numerous academic literacies and skills required to make a smooth start, which can add stress to the first year, in particular.
- Studying in a regional/remote area: practical issues and natural disasters
  - Timetabling
  - Placements and practicals
  - Internet access and reliability, and students' "workarounds"
  - Natural disasters and volunteering
- Financial issues
  - Financial stress was a factor for more than half of the survey respondents. It was particularly challenging for students who relocated from major cities for their studies, and for students located in regional/remote areas who needed to drive vast distances to attend on-campus tutorials and laboratory sessions.

5.6. Summary of findings

A variety of factors impacted on students' mental wellbeing, both within the context of their daily learning and interactions with their university course, curriculum, peers and staff, and outside of the university environment, such as practical issues (for example, unreliable internet) and financial challenges. Several aspects of the students' learning experiences were revealed in the qualitative analyses and highlight the importance of teaching and learning for student mental wellbeing. Mature-aged students in certain sub-groups within the regional and remote cohort – such as students who studied online and part-time, and students with children – experienced compounding challenges and impacts.

Almost half of the survey respondents, 47.7 per cent (n=883), considered deferring/ withdrawing from their university course. The top two reasons why students considered deferring/withdrawing were: i) stress (65.6%); and ii) feeling overwhelmed by their university study-load (55.4%).

The survey responses to a series of statements that focused on the different periods within the cycle of a semester highlighted the temporal nature of stress with some periods of time within a semester being more stressful than others. Unsurprisingly, the most stressful periods were the time just before assignments were due and the final weeks of semester. School holiday periods were a stressful time for a large minority of students, as were the pre-semester/orientation periods and the first week of semester.

Illustration 5. Off to work FIFO

6. How do students support their mental wellbeing?

This section considers how students support their mental wellbeing. It commences with a focus on two statements from the student survey about potential informal supports within students' everyday interactions in their learning environments. It then presents findings about students' awareness of their universities' centrally-located support services, such as counselling. It concludes with the qualitative findings from the student survey (open-ended question) and student interviews that reveal students' strategies for supporting their mental wellbeing.

6.1. Supports: staff and peers

Two statements in the survey focused on potential avenues of informal support — staff and students. Responses to the two statements, outlined in Table 7, are mixed. Further analysis revealed that students who studied online or part-time were more likely not to have someone to turn to at university for support and not to have a supportive peer group.

Table 7. Supports: staff and peers

Statement	Strongly agree/agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Strongly disagree/disagree (%)	Does not apply to me (%)
1. I have at least one person (staff or student) who I can turn to at university for support.	54.7	12.9	31.1	1.3
2. I have a supportive peer group (face-to-face or online) at university.	33.0	17.1	46.7	3.2

While more than half of the respondents (54.7%) agreed/strongly agreed that they had at least one person (staff or student) they could turn to at university for support, of concern is that nearly one third (31.1%) of the respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement. Further analysis revealed significant associations with students' study mode, type of attendance and age:

- Online students were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree (67.8%) with the statement that they had at least one person (staff or student) to turn to for support compared with on-campus students (14.7%) or students who studied a mix of on-campus/online (18%) ($p<0.001$).
- Similarly, part-time students were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree (60.7%) with the statement compared with full-time students (39.3%) ($p<0.001$).
- A higher proportion of students aged 31–40 and a lower proportion of students aged 21–25 were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree with the statement ($p=0.01$).

Furthermore, the students who did not have at least one person to turn to at university for support were more likely to report that their family ($p<0.001$) and their friends outside of university ($p=0.004$) had a negative/extremely negative impact on their mental wellbeing.

It is also of concern that 46.7 per cent of respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement: "I have a supportive peer group (face-to-face or online) at university". For this statement, significant associations were found with study mode, type of attendance and age, as well as with students with disability and students with a medical condition:

- Online students were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree (63.3%) with the statement that they had a supportive peer group compared with on-campus students (16.6%) or students who studied a mix of on-campus/online (20.1%) ($p<0.001$).
- Similarly, part-time students were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree (59.9%) with the statement compared with full-time students (40.1%) ($p<0.001$).
- A higher proportion of students aged 31–40 and a lower proportion of students aged 21–25 were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree with the statement ($p=0.01$).
- Students with disability were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree with the statement ($p=0.01$).
- Students with a medical condition were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree with the statement ($p=0.02$).

Again, the students who reported not having a supportive peer group were also more likely to report that family and friends had a negative/extremely negative impact on their mental wellbeing ($p<0.001$ and $p=0.001$ respectively).

The finer-grained results for the two statements highlight that specific sub-groups of students (for example, students who studied online or part-time or were aged 31–40) not only had no one to turn to for support at university, but they also were likely not to have support or understanding of their university studies from people close to them outside of university (that is, their family and friends). The opposite was also the case; students from other sub-groups (such as, students who studied on-campus or full-time) were more likely to have someone to turn to at university for support and have a supportive peer group. Furthermore, these sub-groups were also likely to report that their family and friends had a positive or extremely positive impact on their mental wellbeing. This analysis shows that some groups had support and positive impacts within and outside of university, while others had neither.

Main points

- Nearly a third of the survey respondents (31.1%) did not have at least one person they could turn to for support at university. These students were more likely to:
    - study online
    - study part-time
    - be aged 31–40
    - report that their family and friends had a negative/extremely negative impact on their mental wellbeing.
- Nearly half of the survey respondents (46.7%) did not have a supportive peer group. These students were more likely to:
    - study online
    - studying part-time
    - be aged 31–40
    - have a disability
    - have a medical condition
    - report that their family and friends had a negative/extremely negative impact on their mental wellbeing.
- There are sub-groups of students (for example, students who studied online or part-time) who were more likely *not* to have support within *and* outside university.
- In contrast, there are sub-groups of students (for example, students studying on-campus or full-time) who were more likely to have support both within *and* outside university.

6.2. Managing the challenges of being a university student

Another survey question focused on how students managed the challenges of being a university student. Six of the statements were about students drawing on their personal strengths, strategies and capabilities. Five of the statements were about students talking to or asking others for assistance; the results are outlined in Table 8.

Table 8. Managing university challenges

Statement	Agree/ strongly agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree/ strongly disagree (%)	Does not apply to me (%)
1. I manage by myself.	81.3	7.3	11.4	0.1
2. I manage by talking to other students at university.	33.8	18.7	40.6	6.9
3. I manage by asking teaching staff (e.g. lecturers/tutors) questions.	52.0	20.2	26.9	1.0
4. I manage by asking for assistance from support staff (e.g. learning skills advisors, librarians, student advisors).	32.3	21.8	41.2	4.8
5. I manage by asking family members to help out more at home.	48.1	11.6	31.4	8.8
6. I manage by asking for help from my friends.	27.1	17.3	48.9	6.8
7. My determination helps me manage the challenges.	87.8	7.8	4.1	0.4
8. My resilience helps me manage the challenges.	85.7	9.6	4.5	0.2
9. My time management strategies help me manage my university studies.	68.0	13.2	18.6	0.2
10. My self-care strategies help me manage the challenges.	60.8	19.2	19.4	0.6
11. My life experiences help me manage my university studies.	85.0	9.4	5.5	0.2

The highest agree/strongly agree responses were for the six statements about students managing by themselves and drawing on their personal traits (such as, determination and resilience).

- My determination helps me manage the challenges. (87.8%)
- My resilience helps me manage the challenges. (85.7%)
- My life experiences help me manage my university studies. (85.0%)
- I manage by myself. (81.3%)
- My time management strategies help me manage my university studies. (68%)
- My self-care strategies help me manage the challenges. (60.8%)

The remaining five statements, which are about asking others for assistance, had a split of responses between agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree. Significant associations were found for the two statements in Section 6.1 above in Table 7 and statements 5 and 6 in Table 8.

- The students who did not have a supportive peer group were more likely not to ask for help from family members (p=0.01) or friends (p<0.001).
- Students who did not have at least one person (staff or student) they could turn to at university for support were more likely not to ask for help from family members (p=0.003) or friends (p<0.001).
- The opposite situation was also the case; that is, students who had a supportive peer group and/or someone to turn to at university for support were also more likely to manage their university challenges by asking family members and friends for help.

These findings align with the findings in Section 6.1; again, two sub-groups are evident; students with support from students or staff were more likely to ask for help, and students without it were not.

Students managing their university challenges by themselves is also reflected in the qualitative data. The majority of students interviewed had a strong sense of purpose and internal motivation; they viewed study as "their thing" and "their time". A reality for students who lived far from major cities was that they had to problem-solve, often alone, especially if they were studying online.

Main points

- Overall, the students in this study indicated they were self-reliant and drew on their personal traits to manage university studies and its challenges.
- In regard to asking for help, from within or outside university, the results are mixed.
  - The students who did not have a supportive peer group or someone to turn to at university were more likely not to ask family or friends for help.
  - Conversely, the students who did have a supportive peer group or someone to turn to at university were more likely to ask family or friends for help.

6.3. Awareness of wellbeing events and counselling services

A series of five questions about universities' provision of mental health and wellbeing resources and events, and counselling services revealed that high numbers of students were unaware of or unsure about the availability of wellbeing events at their university, but nearly three-quarters of the respondents were aware that they could access counselling services. As noted in Section 2, universities provide counselling services for students and promote health and wellbeing events via face-to-face events and provide resources for students online.

In response to the question, "Does your university run wellbeing/health promotion events?", 48.1 per cent (n=889) of respondents answered "yes"; 1.7 per cent (n=32) answered "no"; and 50.2 per cent (n=927), which is the majority of the respondents, were "not sure".

- Of the students who answered "yes", 18.7 per cent (n=166) participated in such events, while 81.3 per cent (n=720) did not.
- Of the students who participated in the wellbeing/health promotion events, 74.6 per cent (n=123) responded "yes" to the question, "are they helpful for your mental wellbeing?".

In response to the question, "At university, do you have opportunities to learn about mental health and wellbeing?", 45.8 per cent (n=846) answered "yes"; 7.1 per cent (n=131) answered "no"; and 47.1 per cent (n=871) answered "not sure". The responses "no" and "unsure" make up the majority of responses.

Of the 1,848 students who answered the question about their awareness of online resources on their university website about mental health and wellbeing, 45.2 per cent (n=835) of respondents were aware. However, the majority, 54.8 per cent (n=1,013), were not aware of online resources.

- Of the students who were aware, 18.9 per cent (n=157) used the online resources, and 81.1 per cent (n=672) did not.
- Of the students who used the resources, 68.4 per cent (n=106) found them helpful for their mental wellbeing.
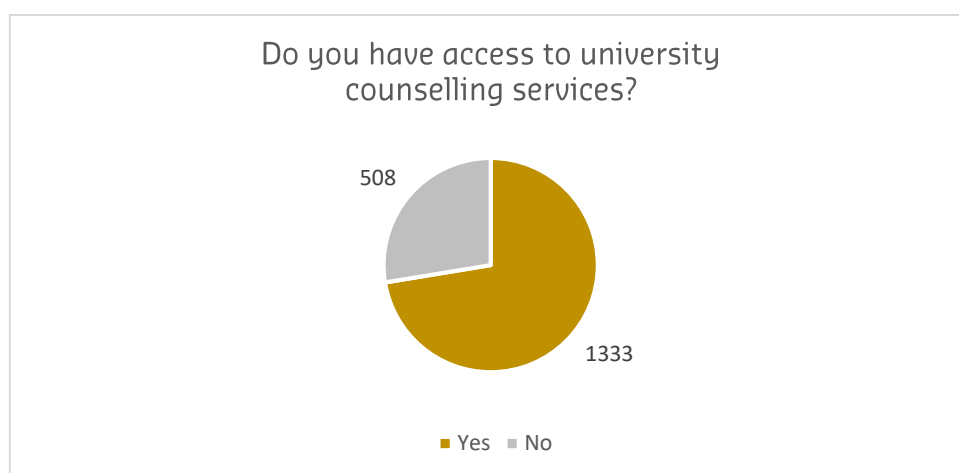
Figure 14. Access to counselling services

The final question was about students' access to university counselling services. Of the 1,842 respondents, 72.4 per cent (n=1,333) were aware that they could access counselling services, while 27.6 per cent (n=508) indicated that they did not have access.

- Of the students who believed they had access to university counselling services, 23.2 per cent (n=306) had accessed them; 75.2 per cent (n=995) had not; and 1.5 per cent (n=20) selected "prefer not to answer".
- Of the students who had accessed the university counselling services, 59.9 per cent (n=182) found the services helpful for their mental wellbeing; 25.3 per cent (n=77) did not; and 14.8 per cent (n= 45) selected "not sure".

Stories behind the numbers

Comments by interviewees indicated that students often did not know about their university's services until they needed them. For example, Lara, who studied online and in another state from where her university was located, was unaware that she could access counselling services:

> *I became super anxious about all of it and sort of actually considered quitting the course, I rang the University … and I said, "Look, I'm really not coping very well." And they said, "Do you know that we have a counselling service available?" and I said, "No, I didn't," and they actually arranged for a lady … to actually ring me … and also talked to me a lot about my actual sort of fears of what I was concerned about, and also reassured me that there were lots of other students that go*

through similar things. Yes, so that was really, really helpful as well. (Lara, Interview 2)

Andrea, a single mother of two children who studied at a regional campus, was unaware of Disability/Accessibility Services at her university or that her panic disorder was a condition that a university Disability Advisor could assist her with:

And so I was just lucky enough to run into my English tutor, who I built a really lovely rapport with, and she just happened to say to me, you know, "Is everything okay today?" and I was, like, "No, it's not"… And then she was the one that steered me towards … the coordinator of disabilities, and I remember saying to my tutor "Oh, but I don't have a disability," and she goes, "Well, you kind of do but it's a mental health one." … that's when uni life became a bit more doable for me… (Andrea, Interview 27)

Similarly, Ursula, who studied at a regional campus in another state was unaware of Student Support Services, even though she frequented her regional campus:

[A staff member at the regional campus] said, "You need to contact the student wellbeing people and you need to get an access plan," I'm going, "Whoa, whoa, what is all this?" That actually led to me being ... recognised I had a condition that was impacting on my study, … So yeah, but those six months were definitely impacting on my studies, you could see it on my grades. But then again, [the University] was quite helpful. I'd never heard about this student wellbeing access centre, had no idea. That was really awesome of them to do that. (Ursula, Interview 33)

In these three examples, it was the staff members who assisted students by linking them to the relevant Student Support Services. The last two examples, which took place on-campus, show how important the incidental conversations were and the impact that staff can have on students in taking a few minutes to ask how they are going; this type of "checking in" is often from staff who students see regularly and with whom they have trust and a rapport. Such "corridor" conversations are more difficult to replicate in the online environment, and trust and a rapport might take longer to develop between staff and students, but, nevertheless, are of importance for online students.

In thinking about why she was unaware of the supports available at her university, Ursula offered the following reasons and suggestions:

This might sound really weird. We got heaps of information [at orientation]. Like I said, sometimes it's information overload whatever, which then also then creates the opposite of people wanting to take it on. So, you know, uni will say, "But we gave them everything." Yeah, but it's just stuffing it in the bag and going, "Here." There's just that next step that's missing somehow. That's why I'm just thinking you need that human person. They may already do that, but it's actually having a stall with staff that deliver this service, or created the mindfulness website, actually to be there and talk about it, and to even run a small little workshop. And the uni has got to promote their own services as well [beyond just information at orientation] or, you know, and also promote their mental wellbeing website that they have, and their mindfulness workshops that they've got running online, and they need to promote that. (Ursula, Interview 33)

Ursula made the point that it is not enough to provide services and online resources and to promote them once, for example during Orientation, which could be a period of information overload. It is often years later that a student might need the Counselling or Disability/Accessibility Services and by then they may have forgotten what they heard at Orientation.

A positive counter-narrative to students not being aware of Student Support Services, such as Counselling or Disability/Accessibility Services, is the awareness and use of supports provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as was the experience of Jessica (Interview 7), an Aboriginal student who relocated to a major city to study on campus. Jessica was proactive in engaging with university supports; in particular, she noted the academic, social and emotional support provided by staff and students in the centre for Indigenous studies at her university, and the benefits of the relationships that she formed:

> *It just makes you enjoy the experience a lot more... I think more so the relationship with [the head of the Indigenous support centre] and other Indigenous students... Like, just feeling so supported. And being so supported, whether it's in your personal life, having friends to hang out with, having study buddies to study with.* (Jessica, Interview 7)

For Jessica, the staff support, peer support and community of support she experienced on campus in the centre for Indigenous studies was essential, given her family, friends and community were so far away; this on-campus support assisted her in achieving her academic goals.

The results from the series of quantitative questions and some interviewees' experiences highlight the fact that students in this study were not always aware of what mental health/wellbeing-related supports were provided at their university and/or on their university website. This situation indicates the need for timely promotion of such information, with a human face, as well as just-in-time reminders.

Main points

- The quantitative survey results about students' awareness of wellbeing events and counselling services revealed:
  - More than half of the respondents (50.2%, n=927) were unsure if wellbeing/health promotion events were run at their university.
  - Nearly half of the respondents (47.1%, n=871)) were unsure if they had opportunities to learn about mental health and wellbeing at their university; 7.1 per cent (n=131) reported that they did not have opportunities.
  - More than half (54.8%, n=1,013) were not aware of online resources on their university website about mental health and wellbeing.
  - 72.4 per cent (n=1,333) were aware that they could access counselling services at university.
- Comments from some interviewees highlight that they were often unaware of the university Student Support Services until they needed them and were introduced to them by a staff member.
- Comments from some interviewees show the importance of small actions by staff, which ultimately assisted these students in seeking support from their university Student Support Services.
- There is a mismatch between universities' provision of wellbeing events and online resources and students' awareness of them. Timely promotion and reminders of the range of university services that support students are required throughout a student's course.

6.4. Qualitative findings: how do students support their mental wellbeing?

Qualitative findings revealed further insights into how students manage their mental wellbeing. The survey participants were asked what strategies they use. Their responses encompass a myriad of ways in which they did or did not manage their mental wellbeing. They are grouped into the following interrelated categories; many responses are multi-faceted:

- take care of general health and wellbeing: nutrition, exercise, sleep and hobbies
- take care of emotional/psychological/spiritual wellbeing
- implement "good" study habits, and have a long-term goal and purpose
- talk to partner, family, friends, peers (to debrief, off-load)
- assess the situation and make changes
- seek professional assistance (for example, from a general practitioner, psychologist, counsellor)
- use comfort strategies
- use distraction strategies
- use unhealthy strategies (for example: drugs, alcohol)
- do not have proactive strategies.

This section presents some of the qualitative data to illustrate students' experiences of study and their self-management strategies. Overwhelmingly, the responses revealed that the majority of participants knew very well how to manage their mental wellbeing. Their strategies for looking after their physical and psychological health (managing time, planning, prioritising tasks, and their approaches to complex tasks) could be found in a "best practice guide to being a successful student". They also tended to be proactive in implementing their strategies, as is evident in the following comments:

> *I try to manage my time efficiently. I have increased my physical activity and am conscious of the importance of sleep. I have also reduced my alcohol intake.* (Student Survey)

> *Taking things one day at a time but also planning ahead so I don't allow myself to get swamped. Trying to make sure the assessments are done well before the due date.* (Student Survey)

> *I try to always have good time management both daily, weekly etc which includes the same time waking up and going to bed, getting into my study at the same time each day, having regular breaks throughout the day and eating and sleeping well. I also make quality time for my family, friends and animals. I walk my dogs at the end of nearly every day. I use my term planner to keep track of my unit weeks and what is due when. I also find making some small amounts of time for my art and photography helps with the creative side of me, which refreshes my energy.* (Student Survey)

The emphasis on planning and time management may relate to the demographic characteristics of the mature-aged cohort, which is largely made up of women with caring responsibilities and often with other work commitments to balance. Accordingly, these students prioritised keeping up with their university workload and being well ahead of their deadlines as a way to manage the stress related to university study.

Numerous participants mentioned talking as a strategy to manage their mental wellbeing. Talking was identified as a way to debrief and off-load; it primarily took place with partners, family members and friends, but also with colleagues, peers and teaching staff.

Talking through my situation with my best friends; eat chocolate; think and process, analysing all angles; relaxing/spending time with my daughters; going out with friends; redirecting my attention to helping with other people's problems. (Student Survey)

Face to face units have given me a great group of young student friends who I chat to in class and keep in contact with on Facebook, or work in groups with. (Student Survey)

I like to talk to my friends and family about it because I don't like to keep these emotions bottled-up inside me. I find that talking to others who are in a similar circumstance to me, are able to understand and provide relevant advice and tips. I also like to make sure I am organised and time manage, as this helps me think clearly and feel good about myself. I also like to have fun and make sure I am busy so I don't get too caught up on feeling sad emotions. (Student Survey)

The last quotation also revealed the student's emotional self-awareness, as well as the roller coaster of emotions that can be experienced as a university student.

Another strategy, primarily implemented by students who were juggling multiple commitments, was to assess their situations and make practical changes that were often around creating more time for studies. The feasibility of completing several assignments by the due dates, while doing a certain number of hours of paid work, was a common conundrum. Major decisions were made, which impacted negatively on students' finances, in order to "free-up" more time for study. For instance, some students decreased their work hours or increased the number of days their children were in childcare. Others took annual leave, which was not used for a holiday, but to: complete their assignments; study for exams; attend practicals, placements and residentials; and relieve pressure.

Take days of annual leave leading into exams to revise the content. Started walking in mornings before work with children (7yo & 9yo) and dog, to achieve some physical exercise and time with family. (Student Survey)

Open conversations with my work and negotiating time off for personal leave to complete studies during the day whilst family is at work and day-care - this is the only time you are able to focus on the tasks at hand without interruption. (Student Survey)

I travel once a month to see a Therapist. I put my daughter in an extra day of day-care when I need some extra time for study or my mental health. (Student Survey)

For some students, there were a mix of "positive" and "negative" strategies, such as the following example of a student walking and talking with friends, but also using distractions.

Going for walks and talking to close friends. Other strategies are less positive, such as smoking cigarettes and distracting myself with YouTube, Netflix and video games. (Student Survey)

Other students noted that they did not have any strategies or that they did not use any strategies until they were "pushed too far"; at that point, their strategies were reactive rather than proactive. In contrast to the comments that revealed that students had an outlet for their stress and negative emotions, such as talking and exercising, other students' reactions included "crying", "grinding teeth", and "chewing fingernails". Some students mentioned internalising it, "bottling it up" and the need to "carry on".

Internalising the stress is the only coping mechanism as we have no support remotely. (Student Survey)

I'm a constant ball of stress, not really sure how I'd cope without being stressed. (Student Survey)

It is likely that their different circumstances impact on how they manage their mental wellbeing. Some students may have limited opportunities to talk and share the difficulties of their experiences, while others may have friends and family who are willing to talk and listen, and to help them process their emotions.

It is the circumstances of students' lives that often create barriers to them implementing "healthy" practices. While they might have had numerous strategies for supporting their mental wellbeing, it does not mean that they were always able to implement them. For example, if their economic situation required them to work full-time, and their family situation required them to spend a certain number of hours caring for their children and parents, and their geographical location required them to drive for hours to reach a campus for compulsory classes, then the "healthy" practices to maintain their wellbeing, which require time (for example: to exercise; get enough sleep; cook a healthy meal; go out with friends), were likely not to fit in students' busy schedules, which may have further exacerbated the existing stress. In addition, while having the requisite time was one issue, another was the state of wellbeing that students found themselves in. If they were not coping and were feeling distressed, it was likely to be more difficult for them to implement the "healthy" strategies; it was at these times that students might turn towards the "unhealthy" strategies, such as drugs and alcohol or binge-watching Netflix.

Main points

- The majority of students in this study indicated that they knew how to look after their mental wellbeing.
- However, students reported that it was not always possible to implement self-care and other "healthy" strategies whilst juggling multiple commitments.
- For many students in this study, there was a mismatch between the academic demands and the time that students had to meet them along with other commitments vital to maintaining their general health, their families and their finances.

6.5. Summary of findings

While more than half of the respondents (54.7%) agreed/strongly agreed that they had at least one person (staff member or student) they could turn to at university for support, of concern is that nearly one third (31.1%) of the respondents did not. Also of concern is that 46.7 per cent of respondents reported not having a supportive peer group (whether it be face-to-face or online) at university. The finer-grained analysis found that specific sub-groups of students (for instance, students who studied online or part-time or aged 31–40) not only had no one to turn to for support at university, but they were also likely not to have support with their university studies from people close to them outside of university; for example, they were more likely to report that their family and friends had a negative/extremely negative impact on their mental wellbeing.

There is a discrepancy between universities' provision of Student Support Services and students' awareness of them. The quantitative analysis of the survey results revealed a lack of awareness of wellbeing/health events and online resources on their university website about mental health and wellbeing. On a more positive note, 72.4 per cent (n=1,333) of survey respondents were aware that they could access Counselling Services at university.

Comments from some interviewees highlighted that they were unaware of their university's Student Support Services until they needed them and were introduced to them by a staff member. It illustrates the importance of small actions by staff, which ultimately assisted these students in seeking support from their university's Student Support Services.

The majority of students in this study indicated that they knew how to look after their mental wellbeing. However, students reported that it was not always possible to implement self-care and other "healthy" strategies whilst juggling multiple commitments. For many students in this study, there was a mismatch between the academic demands and the time that students had available to meet them along with other commitments vital to maintaining their general health, their families and their finances.

7. Discussion

7.1. Employing an ecological systems framework

This discussion addresses the complexity of the lives of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia and how it impacts on their mental wellbeing (RQ1). It explores the research participants' experiences of juggling multiple roles and concerns around being invisible in their courses. The discussion also engages with the question of what can be done better to support student mental wellbeing (RQ2) and reveals the importance of inclusive practices in teaching and learning, and student support.

This section employs an ecological systems framework to discuss the myriad factors that impact on students' mental wellbeing. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model enables consideration of students' everyday experiences against broader social, historical, political and cultural influences that condition their experiences. This model enables the emergence of a more holistic picture of the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote areas. This approach places the experiences of individual students within larger contexts, revealing the ways in which insitutional elements and/or broader higher education policy influence students' mental wellbeing.

The layers—or ecosystems—of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory are illustrated in Figure 2 (in Section 3), and briefly described in the first column of Table 9, which is adapted from synthesese of Bronfenbrenner's theory by Emery (2019) and Eriksson et al. (2018). The factors in the second column show the vast array of influences on students' mental wellbeing at the different levels. Some are in close proximity to a student; others are far removed, but, nevertheless influential in the ecosystem of interrelated parts. The factors and questions in Table 9 are compiled predominantly from the survey and interview data analyses, as well as from literature, and the consideration of broader social, systemic, historical, political and cultural influences.

Table 9. Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems and mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia

Setting/ layer/ ecosystem	Mature-aged student in/from regional and remote Australia
Individual Personal characteristics Background	- Gender - Age - Health (physical and mental), disability - Purpose, motivation, confidence - Prior educational experience, preparedness for study - Expectations of higher education - Indigeneity, ethnicity, refugee/migrant background, FiF - Financial situation - Geographical location
Microsystem The microsystem is the setting in which an individual's immediate relationships take place — their everyday environments — such as home, school (university), workplace.	The student's relationships with their: - Family - Friends - University teaching staff - University professional staff - University peers - Work colleagues - Children's childcare - Community members

Mesosystem The mesosystem involves the interrelationships between an individual's microsystems.	• How do their family/friends support (or hinder) their university studies? • How does their caring role impact on their studies? • How do their extended family, community, cultural responsibilities impact on their studies? • Does their employer support their studies? e.g. do they offer flexibility in choice of shifts so the student can attend compulsory classes? • Impact on staff mental wellbeing

Exosystem
The exosystem involves major institutions and social structures of a society. The individual does not have an active role in the exosystem, but the social structures impinge on an individual's settings.
	• University environment
	   ○ Academic staff (i.e. teaching staff: lecturer, tutor) – e.g. implementing university rules and regulations such as extensions for assignments
	   ○ Professional staff (e.g. support staff, librarians)
	   ○ University academic requirements, rules and regulations
	   ○ University policies, priorities, strategies (e.g. widening participation; equity group targets for equity indicators, such as access, participation, retention)
	   ○ University wellbeing initiatives
	• Higher education budget, student fees, HECS debt
	• Health, education and industry demands in regional/remote community

Macrosystem
The macrosystem is the culture, and its attitudes and ideologies, and laws and regulations.
 	
It includes SES, ethnicity, race.
	• Cultural norms and values of the students' regional/remote community:
	   ○ regarding the importance placed on higher education
	   ○ regarding attitudes, e.g. 'who do you think you are going to uni?'
	• The university culture and its philosophies, attitudes and expectations
	   ○ including attitudes and expectations of teaching staff (e.g. expecting students "to know" the academic culture and its hidden rules and expectations upon commencement; expecting students to arrive with the multitude of academic literacies)
	• A student's regional/remote community's culture and attitudes; e.g. does anyone in their community understand their university course and study load?
	• A student's family/community SES, Indigeneity, ethnicity; systemic disadvantage
	• Systemic racism; poverty

Chronosystem
Socio-historical contexts that may influence a person
 	
Time
 	
Life transitions.
	• Higher education valued as a way of:
	   ○ getting ahead, progressing a person's career
	   ○ getting one's family out of poverty
	   ○ building capacity in regional/remote Australia
	• Government policies to support/improve access, participation, retention and success of students in equity groups
	• Geographical inequities
	   ○ internet access and affordability in regional/remote Australia
	   ○ infrustructure in regional/remote Australia
	• Neoliberal changes in higher education
	   ○ casualisation of the university teaching workforce
	• Gendered nature of household work
	• When in a student's lifecourse they transition to university

7.2. The complexity of students' mental wellbeing

Factors that impact on students' mental wellbeing were evident at multiple levels of the ecological system. Students' personal characteristics, prior experiences and background factors, such as financial security/insecurity, make up one component of a larger ecosystem of dynamic cultural/philosophical factors that, in turn, interact with structural and systemic factors. The mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia is complex: while some aspects of higher education have positive impacts on students' mental wellbeing (such as positive relationships with tutors and lecturers), and other aspects have negative impacts (for example, too many assessment tasks due at the same time), some aspects have both positive and negative impacts at the same time.

Many factors have influences and impacts that can be situated at multiple layers of the model; for example, a student's financial situation may simultaneously be an individual circumstance (microsystem) and also impacted by conditions of the employment market and economic conditions (macrosystem/chronosystem). Another example is the impact of teaching staff. In the microsystem of the university classroom, a teacher's influence includes the way they apply the institution's rules and regulations, for instance, in granting students extensions for assignments; this can be described as a meso-layer interaction between the microsystem and the exosystem of the university. That same university classroom is subject to macrosystem effects: for example, the lecturer or tutor's teaching philosophy, attitudes and expectations of students.

The complexity of life for mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas meant that there was rarely a neat division between the layers of their ecological systems. Their experiences suggest that often the layers were intersected and that there were impacts and interactions within and between the layers of the ecological system. There is a fluidity between system levels and interactions took place within and between multiple systems.

This discussion further interrogates the findings of the complexity of life circumstances for the research participants and the "juggling act" that many had to maintain throughout their studies.

7.3. "The juggling act": microsystem impacts on mental wellbeing

One of the striking findings of this research was the complexity of the lives of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas. During the interviews, students were asked to describe their commitments and responsibilities outside of university; this revealed a picture of very busy lives of people who are contributing in many ways to their families, places of employment and their communities. It was evident that they juggle many roles including their roles as university students and they described the ways their situations impacted on their mental wellbeing. A comment from Alice (a mother, partner and part-time worker) depicts the type of pressures that students reported:

> *The week before an assignment's due is usually the worst week in the world because you're under the pump to get the assignment finished, but you've also got kids yelling at you for attention. Your husband wants attention. Everybody needs you and you just need to sit and work on your assignment, and it can be very difficult trying to get that as well as your weekly content, that you need to attend the classes each week.* (Alice, Interview 51)

While the research participants generally described themselves as being well organised and efficient in their studies, and reported using a range of strategies to support their own mental

wellbeing, they also spoke of facing an often overwhelming array of demands placed upon them while undertaking their studies. They described being caught in a juggling act — balancing multiple roles and responsibilities in their various microsystems of their home, work and university lives.

This research found that the "juggling" of multiple responsibilities, such as part-time work, parenting, and caring, is predominantly experienced by women. Parents' time spent on paid and unpaid work has gendered patterns with mothers spending more time on household work (childcare and other domestic work) than fathers (Baxter, 2015). Baglow and Gair (2019) assert that further consideration must be given to the stark gender equity issue of the imbalance in family responsibilities for mature-aged female students with family responsibilities.

The expectations of teaching staff in universities can exacerbate the pressure as revealed in Bennett and Burke's (2017) analysis of conceptualisations of time. In the case study university, they found that "although many of the teaching staff talked about being flexible and adaptable when faced with exceptional circumstances, overall, they said "*they expect students to put their study first or reconsider whether it is possible given other demands – especially work and family*" (p. 9, italics added). Such expectations fail to acknowledge important parts of students' lives that may be core to who they are. Bennett and Burke's (2017) finding that some teaching staff expect students to "reconsider" whether study is possible for them runs counter to the broader participation objectives of higher education policy.

Many of the research participants were raising children, caring for parents or partners, being the primary homemaker, working a part- or full-time job, contributing to their communities, and, accordingly, often had to carve out time to focus on their studies. The findings revealed that women, in particular, allocated snippets of time early in the morning and/or late at night for their studies or found time "while the kids were at school": in other words, in between and around their other responsibilities. Similar findings were reported in a New Zealand study by Kahu et al. (2014) who found that mature-aged distance students typically employed strategies of "temporal separation", "physical separation" and "dovetailing" to make and find time for their studies while juggling other commitments.

7.4. Under-provisioned and dealing with exosystem impacts

Section 5 presented findings about the impact on students' mental wellbeing of university teaching and learning processes (including course and curriculum design, assessment tasks, the online learning environment, and teaching staff), as well as practical issues such as placements and practicals, timetabling and internet access. This section discusses such exosystem impacts: that is, the impacts on students of the institutional arrangements of higher education relating to provisions of course delivery. For the majority of students, the exosystem is outside of their individual influence; however, it impacts upon their experiences.

University marketing units recruit students using aspirational messages implying that students will be able to study from anywhere at any time. However, the reality for many of the research participants was quite different and involved many unforeseen obstacles and challenges. Once they commenced a course, they often found a mismatch between their own expectations (in regard to: their preparedness for university studies; the accessibility of course content; flexibility in regard to attendance and assessment tasks) and the expectations of their lecturers and tutors (in regard to: students' time for study; levels of preparedness, understanding of the academic culture, technological skills, and social and cultural capitals). Munro (2011, p. 115) argues that marketing messages "are misleading if they are not accompanied by financial incentives and a more inclusive curriculum that acknowledges the study–work challenges facing non-traditional university students". Baglow

and Gair (2019), Mallman and Lee (2016), and Heagney and Benson (2017) point out that the needs of mature-aged students are not understood or accommodated by universities.

A frequent issue that students reported as impacting on their mental wellbeing were challenges accessing online course materials.[28] Numerous students noted difficulties they experienced with downloading course materials from their regional and remote locations, the mounting pressure they felt when taking hours to download lecture recordings, and that their poor internet access impeded their progress in online courses. One student reported that internet access was a problem of such significance for her that she would withdraw from units/subjects where lecture recordings could not be downloaded. With limited internet access at home, the streaming of lectures was not a possibility; therefore, she needed to download lectures during visits to the library in town for later viewing at home. This situation represents a disjuncture at the exosystem level between the university's course delivery provisioning (for example, embedded lecture videos) and the technologies that students have available to them in their regional and remote locations. Students had expectations that the course content would be provided in formats accessible from their regional/remote location, yet often this was not the case.

Further challenges were evident in relation to student-to-staff interactions and communication with the university. For instance, as reported in the findings in Section 5, online students, in particular, experienced difficulties in getting clear information from teaching staff. Some students tried to seek clarification, for instance, in regard to assessment tasks, by posting questions on discussion forums; some reported receiving answers within 48 hours, but others were left waiting for days or weeks for a response. Such experiences left students' needs unmet and amplified the stress of university study.

In contrast, other students reported that their interactions with teaching staff were a source of positive relationships which could generate wellbeing benefits. This was evident in the experience of the interviewee Todd (Interview 4), an online student, who spoke of the enriching discussions he had with his tutors and lecturers which affirmed his contributions to the course. Similarly, Lydia (a mother, partner, and online student) found teaching staff to be her main connection to the university and source of support. Lydia's lecturer made the difference between her continuing with her studies or withdrawing, as depicted in the following comment:

> *And the exam came up and I freaked out with the question. And couldn't work out, it was difficult. I just couldn't work it out, it doesn't matter how much I read. And you see, I wrote to her … I think I can't do this. And she said to me, breathe. Do this, do that. Okay, just think about this, think about that. And I got through, you know. I got through and a year later, I'm still here.* (Lydia, Interview 16)

University staff play an important role in supporting students' mental wellbeing and sense of belonging (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Crawford et al., 2019; Kahu & Picton, 2019).

University policies and practices in regard to student placements and assessment extensions are another example of exosystem impacts on the experiences of students in the study, which were frequently mentioned as a source of stress in their courses. Several students recounted highly stressful situations where their own major life events (such as experiencing bushfires or personal illness) were not deemed by teaching staff to be sufficient reasons for extensions. Following rules and regulations rigidly in such instances does not

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[28] Please note that the data for this study was collected pre-COVID-19. Since March 2020, universities have been required to shift to an online mode of course delivery, which may have resulted in improvements that address some of the issues experienced by mature-aged students in regional and remote areas. However, larger structural issues faced by these students were not addressed through these COVID-19 responses, including that women (who make up the larger portion of the cohort) disproportionately carry the burden of unpaid household and caring work, and regional and remote students receive poorer provision of high-speed broadband necessary for accessing their university course materials.

meet the needs of this cohort of students. The practices of assigning students to placements in distant regions, or scheduling residentials during school holidays were further examples of how university course design failed to take account of complex life circumstances as one student's survey response revealed:

> *I wish universities would take into account where we live when organising placements, I live in [small regional town] in NSW. I am 25 and work casually while studying full time and my university has just put me in a 4-week placement in [regional town, QLD], 10 hours from where I live. I cannot afford to go, do not want to be that far away from my family for four weeks and have no connections or knowledge of the area. Not once has my university asked me if I would like a placement in the state I live in. I wish they would understand as an external student I don't want to stress about placements every semester.* (Student Survey)

For this cohort, the requirement to relocate away from their family and children for weeks at a time for placements, practicum or residentials was cited as a source of increased financial and emotional stress.

A pervasive theme in the open-ended survey questions and interviews is that students in this study did not expect special treatment from their teachers or the university. Instead, they sought for "the basics" of course design and delivery to be done well, so as not to impede their learning and their progress through their units/subjects. These "basics" centre on their teaching and learning experience: for example, being able to access course materials; clarity of assessment tasks; and having questions answered in a reasonable timeframe. These are not unrealistic expectations and should be universities' core business. However, as the findings revealed, students often had to deal with both under-provision by the university, and rules, procedures and policies that presented obstructions to their progress. Together, these obstacles can result in negative impacts on students' mental wellbeing.

The participants prioritised universities meeting their needs in terms of delivery of "the basics" described above, which can be summarised as quality inclusive learning and teaching environments. However, it was perceived that universities often focus their mental wellbeing support on "feel-good" initiatives such as "wellbeing events" with "beanbags and farm animals", as illustrated in the follow comment:

> *They put on movies and sometimes leave chocolates in the library around exam time which isn't all that helpful because we're too busy to stuff around looking for chocolate and hanging at uni to watch a movie when we're trying to study tbh [to be honest].* (Student Survey)

Some students indicated that they had no time for such initiatives; they regarded them as a distraction from progressing their studies, which is central to their sense of mental wellbeing as students. They perceived such events as being for on-campus students who had time available. One student's comment discerned between what actually supports her wellbeing and the "feel-good" wellbeing supports some universities offer:

> *… having time to accommodate the pressing needs of my community and my family brings me a sense of wellbeing, not free biscuits, platitudes and cliché feel good nonsense that does not address critical structural and political issues that exhaust, impoverish and insult me. Managing my mental wellbeing is a responsibility I take seriously, but it is also a political responsibility to provide easier access to affordable education that supports our community's capacity to create a sustainable future, manageable workloads and social equity. Someone 20 years younger than me telling me to take time for myself and get a massage is not helpful.* (Student Survey)

7.5. Feeling "invisible" and unrecognised: macrosystem impacts

A common theme in this research is participants perceiving that their experiences were not recognised or understood in their courses, and that their contributions to the university environment were not valued. This finding warrants considering in relation to the prevailing attitudes within universities and in broader society. Some students described feeling invisible, both within their university and in their communities, particularly due to their age, geographical location and their online study mode, as well as having family and work commitments. Some students articulated being different and/or not fitting the profile of what it means to be in "the standard school leavers cohort".

Universities have responded over many years to Australian Government targets[29] to widen participation with inclusion, diversity and equity strategies. Despite these endeavours, the research findings suggest that entrenched attitudes and expectations that favour and privilege some students (for example, younger students with time and who study on-campus) over others (for example, older students who juggle numerous commitments, and study online and part-time) continue to prevail. Meyer (2019) makes a similar point in the UK context about widening participation policies opening up universities, but that "the expectations and social norms which define student identity are still based on 'majoritised' templates of privilege" (p. 69). Mallman and Lee (2016) explain that young students who have time and are without family obligations are constructed as "ideal" learners by the institution; in contrast, mature-aged students are seen to carry "baggage" in the form of other commitments, such as family (p. 686). Ulriksen (2009) refers to the concept of "the implied student" to encapsulate "the array of official and tacit expectations about what the students should be like and how" (p. 521). The extent to which a student meets the unwritten, hidden and implicit expectations of what it means to be a student varies and depends on the teachers' expectations of "the implied student" as well as the students' expectations, and on the disciplinary and cultural expectations of the institution and broader society. Ulriksen's conceptualisation shows the potential of teachers' unconscious and implicit expectations to privilege students who have the academic literacies and skills, and the social and cultural capitals expected by staff and the institution. This privileging of one "type" of student over another is not necessarily explicit or intentional; rather, it is likely to be subtle, hidden, implicit and unintentional.

Umbrella terms referred to above (such as, "ideal" and "implied" students), and others such as "traditional" students,[30] refer to the "types" of students that are privileged (and visible and recognised) over "types" of students (such as "non-traditional") who are marginalised (and are invisible and not recognised). Different "types" of students can be implicitly viewed in opposition to each other and in a hierarchy, with one "type" being valued or privileged over the other (for example: school leavers versus mature-aged students; metropolitan/urban versus regional and remote; on-campus versus online). Some equity researchers note such problematic dualistic philosophical thinking in neoliberal discourses in higher education (Burke & Crozier, 2014; Motta & Bennett, 2018). Such hierarchical dualistic thinking has its roots in western philosophy and has undergone feminist critiques that question, resist and call for an erasure of such binaries (Gatens, 1991; Plumwood, 1991). In the context of higher education, such critiques would question and call for addressing the "traditional" versus

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[29] For instance, two of the national targets recommended by the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) and adopted by the Australian Government: "First, a national target of at least 40 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025 (Bradley recommended achieving the target by 2020). Second, that by 2020, 20 per cent of university enrolments at undergraduate level are for people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds" (Dow, 2009).

[30] The terms "traditional" and "non-traditional" are used in this report with caution, noting that they are contested and problematic, and defined variously. However, they serve a purpose here as—even though so-called "traditional" students may be in the minority and "non-traditional" students may be in the majority, especially in universities with widening participation agendas—as is illustrated here, expectations and attitudes (macrosystem factors), as well as exosystem and chronosystem factors, continue to privilege and advantage of one "type" of student over another.

"non-traditional" privileging and categorising, as Burke et al. (2016, p. 8) recommend: "Schools and universities must proactively challenge stereotypes about the 'types' of students who are capable of university study".

With "ideal", "implied" or "traditional" students' needs and strengths foregrounded in, for example, course and curriculum design, content, materials, timetabling and deadlines, the "non-traditional" students' needs and strengths are not catered for sufficiently. A social justice orientation is one way of addressing this hierarchy to value difference and diversity and to genuinely focus on engaged participation for *all* students (Gidley et al., 2010). Such an approach would value and draw upon the numerous assets and expertise of, for instance, mature-aged students in regional and remote areas, such as their: insights from the workplace or raising a family; cultural awareness; and lived experience of managing complexity.

7.6. The importance of inclusive practices

There are numerous "disjunctures" within the university ecological system as it is configured for mature-aged students in regional and remote areas. On the one hand, a university might have widening participation and equity, inclusion and diversity policies and strategies to improve the access and participation of students from equity groups. On the other hand, as this research has found, students from such groups might feel invisible, ignored and undervalued, and their needs in terms of their learning (as described above) might not be met, thus impacting on their mental wellbeing. In this analysis, these macrosystem effects of entrenched attitudes are in discord with the widening participation agenda in universities and have been shown to have real consequences for the students' experiences of their multiple microsystems and their meso-layer interactions with the university exosystem. In analysing the different discourses of social inclusion at Australian universities, Hughes (2015, p. 310) notes that while some are undergoing profound changes, "others appear to be using the discourses of social inclusion and offering greater ease of entry for 'diverse' students whilst not necessarily altering their teaching and learning practices to assist them achieve".

This analysis has highlighted the need for inclusive practices to cater for all students. Embedding the development of academic literacies in units/subjects is inclusive practice, as is making assessment tasks and feedback explicit. Inclusive practices, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), cater for all students by offering students choice and flexibility by providing multiple ways for students to: access their learning materials; be engaged; and demonstrate their learning (CAST, 2020; Kinash & Sahay, 2018). Inclusive practices are not limited to teaching and curriculum design; they are equally important for the design and delivery of services and resources in, for example, Student Support Services and Library Services.

Given that the majority of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia study online, (as highlighted in the findings in Sections 4.1 and 4.2), a fundamental requirement for them to partake in any study is having access to consistent and high-speed internet. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) "measures three vital dimensions of digital inclusion: Access, Affordability, and Digital Ability" (Thomas et al., 2018, p. 5). In 2018 report, *Measuring Australia's digital divide*, which looked at changes in digital inclusion during the previous four years, geography continues to be an important factor: "The ADII reveals substantial differences between rural and urban areas" (p. 6). Affordability is also a concern, particularly for low-income and fixed earners, with people spending higher proportions of household incomes on internet services. Digital ability is another ongoing concern. Numerous reports that have focused on regional or remote university students in Australia have noted that internet access continues to be an obstacle for students (Devlin & McKay, 2017; King et al., 2018; NCSEHE, 2018; Nelson et al., 2017; Pollard, 2018); Pollard's (2018) recommendations for policy in her NCSEHE Equity Fellowship report, *Remote student*

university success, called for "reliable internet access [to be] immediately recognised as an equity issue" (p. 41). It is difficult to be inclusive and equitable in online delivery when such a fundamental need is not universally available and/or affordable for students in regional and remote Australia.

7.7. The impact on staff mental wellbeing

The mental wellbeing of academic and professional staff needs to be considered alongside the important role that they play in supporting students' mental wellbeing (as noted in Section 7.4). Regardless of how equipped teaching staff feel they are to support students, they are often the first port of call for students experiencing academic and non-academic challenges (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Hughes et al., 2018). Providing support and pastoral care can carry an emotional load and impact negatively on staff mental wellbeing (Crawford et al., 2018).

The meso-level interactions that impact on staff mental wellbeing take place in a larger context of exosystem impacts including staff workloads and workforce precarity. In the UK Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Occasional Paper, *Pressure Vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff,* Morrish (2019) characterises universities as "anxiety machines" and attributes the stress and poor mental health experienced by academic staff to excessive workloads, an audit culture with metric surveillance, as well as increasing workforce precarity and insecure contracts.

The casualisation of academic work (Connell, 2013) impacts on *who* supports students' mental wellbeing in the context of the teaching and learning environment, and the time and resourcing they have, for instance, to check in with students and respond to discussion posts on the LMS. Casual academic staff make up a majority of the academic workforce in Australia and have a crucial role in teaching (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013). As Rothengatter and Hil (2013, p. 52) note, "in some cases, casual staff undertake up to 80 per cent of first year teaching and more than 50 per cent of all university teaching". In researching online learning in Australia, Stone (2017, p. 30) found concerns about "the high numbers of casual (or sessional) staff employed to do much of the online teaching" and the number of hours they were allocated, along with how they were poorly paid. The casual teaching staff (for example, online tutors) were often not paid for the number of hours required to monitor the discussion forums and undertake other tasks in order to provide a "teacher presence". Stone (2017, p. 72) notes that "tutors can spend many personal hours on student contact, over and above their paid hours which are often not sufficient to ensure an effective level of contact".

Highlighting the important role of teaching and professional staff in supporting students' mental wellbeing in teaching and learning contexts needs to be considered in the broader context of staff workloads and resourcing, and these issues need to be addressed at the highest levels. Notwithstanding these known sectoral and systemic issues, there are strategies that university staff can implement as part of "good practice" in teaching and learning, and support provision. Such strategies are outlined in the guidelines for proactively supporting student mental wellbeing in Section 9.

This discussion has highlighted the myriad ways that students' mental wellbeing is impacted through a holistic view of a student's ecosystem that reveals complexity. The web of interactions between students' multiple roles at home, work and university require "juggling acts" in order for the students' commitments to be managed. Challenges with university rules and regulations or with course content or delivery that are designed for so-called "ideal", "implied" or "traditional" students can exacerbate the challenging situations. Inclusive practices in teaching, learning and support offer ways of catering for the needs and strengths of *all* students in order to support and enhance their mental wellbeing. This discussion concluded with the concomitant concern of staff mental wellbeing and the larger contextual

issues in higher education, which also need to be addressed alongside supporting students' mental wellbeing.

Illustration 6. Waiting

Section 4

Who are mature-aged students in regional & remote Australia?

Section 5

What impacts on their mental wellbeing?

Section 6

How do they support their mental wellbeing?

Section 7

Discussion

Section 8: Recommendations for universities and government

1. Know who your students are and respond to student diversity.

2. Value and acknowledge students' strengths and experiences.

3. Support and resource academic and professional staff to implement inclusive pedagogies and practices.

4. Apply an equity lens to rules and regulations.

5. Consider students' access to technology and the internet.

6. Expand access to physical study facilities.

7. Provide financial support.

Section 9: Guidelines for proactively support student mental wellbeing

1. Know your students: understand their diverse challenges, commitments and strengths.

2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring.

3. Embed universal design for learning (UDL) principles in curriculum design and delivery.

4. Consider students' online environment in course and curriculum design and delivery.

5. Facilitate student interactions and connections.

6. Provide pre-university transition or preparation courses and specific orientation events.

7. Consider practical challenges: assessment deadlines, timetabling, placements, internet access, natural disasters.

8. Raise awareness of the full range of university services that support students.

9. Ensure Student Support Services are reponsive to student diversity and inclusive of all students.

Figure 15. A visual depiction of the process informing the recommendations and guidelines

8. Recommendations for universities and government

The striking finding that 47.7 per cent (n=883) of the survey respondents in this research considered withdrawing or deferring from their studies, with the top two reasons being "stress" and "feeling overwhelmed with their university study-load", is a stark message that student mental wellbeing should be of concern to universities and the higher education sector more broadly.

The following recommendations are informed by the findings presented in Sections 4, 5 and 6, and the discussion points in Section 7 (as illustrated in Figure 15), and offer guidance for universities to better support the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas in Australia. Furthermore, if adopted, they will benefit *all* students.

1. Know who your students are and respond to student diversity.
2. Value and acknowledge students' strengths and experiences.
3. Support and resource academic and professional staff to implement inclusive pedagogies and practices.
4. Apply an equity lens to rules and regulations.
5. Consider students' access to technology and the internet.
6. Expand access to physical study facilities.
7. Provide financial support.

While these recommendations are targeted towards universities, recommendations 3, 5, 6 and 7, in particular, are also relevant to the government's higher education policy.

8.1. Know who your students are and respond to student diversity

Universities must be responsive to student diversity to ensure learning and mental wellbeing for all students. In many cases, there are mismatches within institutions: for example, the messages that come from university marketing and recruitment units sometimes differ from the experiences the university can deliver. The marketing messages set up students' expectations, and if the message is not aligned with the course delivery, students' expectations and needs are left unmet.

8.2. Value and acknowledge students' strengths and experiences

Mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia bring diverse experiences, skills and knowledges to higher education. Too often, they are not recognised for these qualities. Many of them are extremely motivated, organised and undertake their studies for a specific purpose: that is, to gain a qualification to work in a specific field located in their regional or remote community. Their potential for: building capacity in their community; promoting the value of education; being a role model to family, friends and community members, is enormous, and they deserve to be recognised as assets rather than burdens.

8.3. Support and resource academic and professional staff to implement inclusive pedagogies and practices

Faculty/College heads and teaching and learning committees should support teaching staff to implement proactive and inclusive practices (as outlined in the guidelines in Section 9) to better support student mental wellbeing. Inclusive practices are not limited to teaching and course design; they are equally important for the design and delivery of services and

resources in, for example, Student Support Services and Library Services. Implementing inclusive practices requires appropriate levels of staffing and resourcing.

8.4. Apply an equity lens to rules and regulations

University rules and regulations are designed to apply to all students, yet it is the case that some students are unfairly disadvantaged by them. It is important to assess university rules and regulations through an equity lens and consider who the rules privilege/advantage or disadvantage. Review rules and regulations to accommodate students with additional needs: for example, students with caring and parenting responsibilities or students experiencing natural disasters, such as drought, floods or bushfires.

8.5. Consider students' access to technology and the internet

While some students study fully online by choice and have up-to-date computer software that supports the requirements of their course, as well as reliable internet access, others do not. The presumption that all students have access to appropriate technology and reliable internet is problematic. Following the call from Pollard (2018) that "reliable internet access [be] immediately recognised as an equity issue", addressing the technological divide is urgent in regional and remote Australia to enable equitable access to higher education for students in these areas. Furthermore, universities need to ensure that students are not being unfairly punished as a result of the technological/internet issues they face through their course delivery.

It is recommended that the higher education sector fund urgent research into the scale of this issue, and examine impacts, particularly on regional and remote students, of the technological divide.

8.6. Expand access to physical study facilities

Students in this study who had access to Regional University Centres benefited from having access to free and fast Wi-Fi and computers, as well as from academic and emotional support. Other students who studied far from campuses noted their need for a physical study space. Where Regional University Centres or regional campuses are not an option for students to attend, universities could support students' access to local libraries, neighbourhood houses, TAFEs, schools and other physical infrastructure. This approach would provide students with places to study, free Wi-Fi and opportunities for online students to meet other students. Universities could also explore establishing reciprocal campus access arrangements with other universities to ensure that more students who are located in regional and remote areas can access physical facilities.

8.7. Provide financial support

Mature-aged students who relocate to major cities for their studies incur financial costs. Students who remain in their regional or remote areas for their studies also experience financial burdens, particularly if they are required to relocate to undertake placements (for example, in nursing and education programs/courses) or attend on-campus intensive practical sessions. Financial support for accommodation and travel expenses is one way of lessening some of the financial stress.

To conclude:

The recommendations outlined here and the guidelines in Section 9 focus on improvements that can be made as suggested by the student participants in this study. In most cases, they are strategies that could be implemented without significant costs. Furthermore, a positive outcome from the "overnight" move to online delivery in March 2020, in response to the

COVID-19 pandemic, is that formerly inconceivable ways of teaching and learning, and of providing support (such as fully online provision to all students) are possible.

As universities develop approaches to support students' mental wellbeing, staff mental wellbeing also needs to be considered, as it is also of increasing concern. In this context, the university sector will need to address the systemic matters that impact on staff mental health and wellbeing, such as workloads and workforce precarity.

Illustration 7. Kombi and free Wi-Fi

9. Guidelines for proactively supporting student mental wellbeing[31]

The recommendations in Section 8 apply to the broader university culture, expectations and its systems. The guidelines in this section are a response to a major theme in this research — the importance of the teaching and learning experience: students' everyday interactions with the curriculum, staff and peers, and the learning environment.

Informed by the research findings (in Sections 4, 5 and 6) and discussion points (in Section 7), the guidelines provide further detail to the recommendations for universities and government in Section 8. Each guideline includes three aspects: i) quote/s from student participants; ii) an explanation of the students' experiences; and iii) *proactive approaches* and ideas for how staff can implement the guideline to support students' mental wellbeing. The guidelines are particularly relevant for academic and professional staff – unit/subject coordinators, lecturers, tutors and support staff.

1. Know your students: understand their diverse challenges, commitments and strengths.
2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring.
3. Embed universal design for learning (UDL) principles in curriculum design and delivery.
4. Consider students' online environment in course and curriculum design, and delivery.
5. Facilitate student interactions and connections.
6. Provide pre-university transition or preparation courses and specific orientation events.
7. Consider students' practical challenges: assessment deadlines, timetabling, placements, internet access and natural disasters.
8. Raise awareness of the full range of university services that support students.
9. Ensure Student Support Services are responsive to student diversity and inclusive of all students.

9.1. Know your students: understand their diverse challenges, commitments and strengths

> *I live in a regional community 225 kilometres from the uni campus. And I work as well… I had to maintain four days a week work, and that's because we have a mortgage… I would not study in the morning if it was a workday. I would work until approximately 4:30 in the afternoon, but my drive to work is a … 40-minute drive. So I would listen to my lectures during the drive to and from, you know, for at least 80 minutes a day, and get home. If there was anything that I needed to do, I would just jump on [the computer] and do it. That would be in between, you know, I play a lot of sport as well. So fitting that in. Husband does most of the cooking, thank God, and yeah, just study through and into the evening as well, any required reading, any assignments. Most weekends were full of uni work.* (Erica, Interview 29)

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[31] Some information in points 9.2, 9.4 and 9.8 appear in Crawford (2020).

This quote from Erica, who juggled work, parenting and university (including a three-hour one-way drive to attend on-campus classes), illustrates some experiences and challenges of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia. In general, this cohort are often juggling part-time or full-time work and parenting with their university studies, whilst driving long distances to their regional campus or studying fully online. They tend to be well organised, driven to succeed, as they have made sacrifices to study, and they have a clear purpose and end goals.

Proactive approaches

Get a sense of who your students are as early as possible. Your university could provide you with demographic information about the students enrolled in your unit/subject. Lecturers and tutors, you could ask your students questions early in semester (for example, about their geographical location; commitments outside of university; prior educational experiences), at the beginning or end of class or during ice-breaker activities. A few simple, unobtrusive questions can provide insights into students' challenges and their strengths; they will also initiate peer-to-peer interactions and connections.

9.2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring

I think the way the uni supports me and the other students is great, and it was always whenever I thought I just can't do it anymore, you know, something in the uni would change… I've actually connected with the inclusion and accessibility team there… that has been an absolute game changer for me because when I was really starting to freak out about exams, assignments, you know, they were there, "Look, if you need more time, that's cool, we can work through that, we'll find a way." And I just think that was amazing because it just took a lot of that ... you know, I had someone to share it with, I suppose, rather than just doing it myself. (Kelly, Interview 43)

Regional/remote help needed is individual. Currently we are in drought, hand feeding animals, paying for water trucks, and watching rabbits eat the roots of everything. I drive a 1-hour round trip to do the washing twice a week. But next year we might be flooding, dragging dead cows out of creeks, and losing soil through erosion. I personally have no-one to talk with about studying; the hardship of juggling work, farm, family, and university. … I feel like a phone call once a fortnight would be nice. Being able to talk about what is good, what is bad, what is enlightening, what is unclear; preferably someone from rural background who can relate to the difficulty and isolation. (Student Survey)

This semester is my last. I've been studying for 6 years and only this year have I had any personal contact with lecturers. This experience has been wonderful. The zoom sessions that have been set up like tutorials have been brilliant and so helpful for support and also learning. (Student Survey)

Studying fully online can be an isolating experience. Some students are proactive in asking questions; however, a lot are not. Having lecturers or tutors check in with students contributes to students feeling they are visible, connected, valued and that they belong to their course and university.

9.3. Embed universal design for learning (UDL) principles in curriculum design and delivery

[The tutors] contextualise the information that they're presenting for [our specific regional/remote area]. And so, it's not only do we get a national understanding of the skills that we need, but we also get it really contextualised for what we're going to need to apply where we are… We've chosen to study at [regional university centre] because we don't want to leave the region. And therefore, they know that we're going to need a certain skill set for this region. And so, they make sure that we [do]. (Olivia, Interview 26)

Despite the student, Olivia, living thousands of kilometres from her university, her course content was contextualised for her remote area, which made it relevant and engaging, and also contributed to her feeling known, included and a sense of belonging.

9.4. Consider students' online environment in course and curriculum design, and delivery

Make the full online tutorials better. Most times they are filmed but the camera films the back of someone's head. The tutors still write on white boards and the writing can't be seen on the video. (Student Survey)

I'm just really lucky that I'm within driving distance of two places that do have free high speed Wi-Fi. Because… if I was only utilising my home internet, and I did for a while, my monthly allocation was running out quite quickly. I couldn't download the texts that I needed to complete assessments. And I certainly couldn't, like, the lectures that I was trying to stream just weren't, they weren't playing smoothly or they weren't playing at all. Yeah, so, it was a bit difficult. (Olivia, Interview 26)

Ensure online systems are efficient — several lectures that were supposed to be recorded have had technical difficulties which makes it difficult to catch up on content. (Student Survey)

[Online students] need more support, not less, than other students. (Student Survey)

The majority of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia are likely to be studying online. This project has found that online students often feel invisible and secondary to their on-campus counterparts. They often feel that they are missing out and getting a sub-standard experience. Furthermore, internet access and bandwidth continue to be a challenge for students in regional and remote Australia.

Proactive approaches

While universities may endeavour to make their online offerings engaging and seamless using particular design features of LMSs, these features can present extra challenges for students in regional and remote Australia. Providing multiple ways of accessing materials will cater for students who cannot, for example, stream online lectures.

Take an inclusive approach to your course content, delivery and LMS tools. As with Guideline 9.3, asking questions within a teaching team about inclusion and exclusion are helpful for design and practice in the online context. For example:

- If you are offering synchronous sessions, not all students will be available at the scheduled time. Ensure that such sessions are voluntary and that options to cover the same material asynchronously are also available.
- If you are recording an on-campus lecture to be shared with online students, acknowledge them and consider what they can and cannot see in the recording. Are they able to see your writing on the whiteboard? Can they hear the question asked from the back of the class? It is a good idea to repeat or summarise the question being asked so that those viewing the lecture online have a clear understanding.
- If you are recording lectures or short videos, note that students in regional and remote Australia will not always have reliable internet connections. Keep your technology simple and ensure that lecture recordings and other materials are downloadable, not just streamable. It will provide students with the opportunity to download the weekly course content, and the flexibility to listen/read/watch at a time suitable to them.
- Online discussion boards need to be maintained by staff throughout the semester; otherwise, online students miss out.

9.5. Facilitate student interactions and connections

My efforts to connect online keep failing. It is not like I am a bad student. I have completed nine subjects with one D and eight HDs. A person can reach out and be ignored only so many times. (Student Survey)

The only time I get to meet other students is just before exams. It would be nice to meet other mature age students in my regional area. (Student Survey)

My most magnificent moment came when I attended residential school. I had no idea what was expected of me, had no idea how to undertake the task given to us. I put my hand up, red faced, and asked to explain it again. When I still didn't understand, I asked and how do I do that exactly! During the break a number of students came up to me and thanked me! that!! That was my most valuable moment as a student. Right there, I realised, I wasn't alone, I wasn't stupid and a lot of people were in my boat; I just hadn't seen them yet! (Student Survey)

While studying independently suits some students—particularly those who have studied previously—for others, university can be an isolating experience. Connecting with peers helps students, particularly online students, to feel they are not alone. Such connections between students foster supportive peer relationships: "sometimes you just need someone to grab you by the arm and go, 'Hey, it's pretty hard, you're doing an awesome job, just finish that assignment, just go and put the words on paper and submit it, just get it done.' Because that can ... make all the difference" (Carolyn, Interview 1). Connecting students can also help academically because learning takes place between peers.

Proactive approaches

Some online students suggested facilitating opportunities for them to meet face-to-face with their peers in their local regional area; for instance, in a library, community centre, café, or Regional University Centre with like-minded students (even with students in other courses/programs and at other universities).

Online students miss the informal (but very useful) conversations that occur in face-to-face contexts; for example, as the lecturer/tutor is setting up for a class or waiting with peers in the corridor prior to class commencing. These opportunities can be created in the online environment, including: dedicated threads on discussion forums with specific questions about the content and assessment tasks; and facilitating online chats or video conference discussions between students.

9.6. Provide pre-university transition or preparation courses and specific orientation events

I was absolutely exhausted my first week into uni because it had been 10 years since I sat down and studied and was expected to do it at the same pace as those who've just left high school and are used to retaining and utilising information. It's an adjustment that I had to figure out on my own and I wish someone had sat me down and told me how it was going to be. (Student Survey)

Universities could offer courses that help you to complete assignments. e.g. how to reference, how to write academically, how to write an essay, time management. By offering 1-1 support and learning how to dissect the questions would be very valuable. All these skills are now taught in schools. When I was at school we did not learn how to do this. I had to learn all these skills. (Student Survey)

I completed tertiary prep course to enter my degree, a section of this course was related to health i.e. nutrition, sleep, study load and planning which I found relevant to think about when studying, especially as life is busy (especially with 4 children) and at times (like assignment times) I am just managing to get through the things that must be done so it is important to remember how important it is to look after our wellbeing also. (Student Survey)

Unsurprisingly, mature-aged students often commence university not knowing what to expect nor having the required/expected academic literacies and skills for university study. The commencement period can be exciting, daunting and "an enormous learning curve" (Student Survey).

Proactive approaches

Pre-university preparation courses (that is, enabling programs) are particularly useful for mature-aged students to familiarise them with the new physical and online environments; learn about the academic culture and get a sense of how to "be" a university student; and develop the numerous academic literacies, such as academic writing; finding information, critical thinking and numeracy. With life skills and prior educational experiences to draw upon and build on, refreshing and developing skills and literacies in a preparation course is likely to build a student's confidence and facilitate student-to-student connections. Some preparation programs also focus on developing literacy around mental health and wellbeing.

Specific orientation workshops for mature-aged students are another opportunity for students to meet and realise they are not alone in their new endeavour, particularly for students who have relocated from regional/remote areas to cities for their studies.

9.7. Consider students' practical challenges: assessment deadlines, timetabling, placements, internet access and natural disasters

Assignment due times at 5pm are not realistic for me as a mother, I have to have my assignment finished the day before to ensure I meet the deadline. A better time for all assignments is 12am (midnight) to give us one last chance to read over our assignments once the children are in bed. (Student Survey)

I had an 8:30 class I was inevitably always late for that class… one of my peers one time made an official complaint about me being late. That was the year that my daughter was in Year 9, and Year 9's a really hard year at high school for kids. She [the teacher] just had to give me a verbal warning and I just accepted it and just said to her that I was doing the best that I could and she said, "I know that". So anyway, that wasn't much fun that day but we both got through it. Yeah, I mean, I wasn't late every class. I had other peers that didn't have the same responsibilities as me and often they were late. And sometimes, too, driving really, you know, you'd get halfway to uni … and there'd be roadworks and you wouldn't be expecting that. (Andrea, Interview 27)

There are numerous practical obstacles faced by students with family and work commitments, and scarce time. The comment above from the student, Andrea, is the story of a single mother of two teenagers who prioritised getting her children prepared and driven to school over being punctual for her 8:30 am class. This resulted in her not meeting university rules around attendance. There were numerous comments from students about deadlines that did not suit their Monday-to-Friday work schedule; they relied on weekends to complete

assessment and tutorial tasks (see Section 5). Such deadlines and other course requirements, such as attendance, can disadvantage some students.

Proactive approaches

Consider the impact of course requirements, and rules and regulations on equity of participation. Provide some leeway and allow for some interpretation of rules and regulations, such as for assignment extensions when students have genuine reasons that might not be categorised in the university documentation, such as experiencing bushfires, floods and drought; moving house; or pregnancy. As with guidelines 9.3, 9.4 and 9.9, ask questions within a teaching team about who is being included or excluded in practical decisions around assignment deadlines and timetabling. A fairer alternative to a Monday-to-Friday period for content release and assessment is a seven-day period to provide students with the weekend, as many who work full-time rely on it. Offer some family-friendly options for tutorial times. For example, a 10 am tutorial start may be more manageable for a student with school-aged children and a 100 kilometre drive to the campus than the 9 am class.

9.8. Raise awareness of the full range of university services that support students

> *Reminders that support services are available and there is no harm in using them.* (Student Survey)

> *I think the more separated you are, the less likely you are to know of what you can do or things you can access.* (Student Survey)

Students are often unaware of their university's support services, and even more so when they study online. They might have heard about some services at an Orientation event, but that may have been during a period of information overload or a long time ago.

Proactive approaches

Ensure that students and staff are aware of the full range of university services: for example, Student Support Services, such as Counselling, Disability/Accessibility Services and Academic Learning Support; centres for Indigenous studies that provide support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; student guilds and associations; and supports at residential colleges. Depending on how support services are promoted centrally, you could send reminders a few times per semester and in different ways, including: an email newsletter; a discussion post/announcement on the LMS; or at the beginning or end of a class.

9.9. Ensure Student Support Services are responsive to student diversity and inclusive of all students

> *I once drove an hour to see IT person only to be told oh sorry we don't see students during spring school break. This was opposite to information on website and verbally told over the phone IT would be available between those hours.* (Student Survey)

> *Actually offer the services in the regional campuses. It's all very well to say counselling is available and then say we have to travel to the city for it. Offer the services flexibly and run the promotional events outside of office hours. Like many mature age students, I work and have caring commitments so there's no*

way I can ever go to their 11am "make a succulent and talk about mental health" workshops. (Student Survey)

The only time I looked for support I went to the appointment only for no one to show up. Apparently the appointment had been cancelled that morning but I didn't receive the email as I can't get them on my phone. I had cancelled work for the day and travelled an hour for the appointment. Even though I sent an email regarding the situation, nobody contacted me. This made me feel very alone and that I didn't matter. Thankfully my lecturer went above and beyond to help me when no one else bothered. (Student Survey)

These students' experiences suggest that support services are often provided with on-campus students and/or students located near city campuses in mind.

Proactive approaches

Student Support Services need to be responsive to the needs of mature-aged students in regional and remote areas. Provide services online as well as on-campus. If provision is not possible for regional/remote students, consider options available through third-party providers.

To conclude:

It is evident that mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia are a cohort that bring a range of experiences and skills into their university life, and who have certain needs. They require a degree of flexibility from teaching staff and a personalised approach to communication. The students in this study did not request "feel-good" initiatives such as "wellbeing events" to support their wellbeing. Instead, they sought for "the basics" of course design and delivery to be done well. These "basics" centre on their teaching and learning experience: for example, being able to access course materials; clarity of assessment tasks; and having questions answered in a reasonable timeframe. An inclusive approach to teaching, learning and support offers ways of catering for the needs and strengths of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia; it is an essential foundation for proactively supporting and enhancing their mental wellbeing.

Relatively small actions by staff, such as a lecturer or tutor replying to a student's email or responding to their post on a discussion forum, were favourably regarded by students (see Section 5.5.6). Students' comments revealed that they were not seeking special treatment from staff, and that they also acknowledged their teachers' heavy workloads. They noticed and appreciated their small actions, which led to them feeling that staff cared, contributing to them feeling known, and connected to their course and university, as well as a sense of belonging.

Illustration 8. Study centre

10. Conclusion

This NCSEHE Equity Fellowship research has contributed a deeper understanding of the circumstances of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas in Australia, and provided insights into what impacts the mental wellbeing of this cohort, and how it can be better supported by universities. Taking an ecosystem perspective, this research highlights the myriad and complex ways that students' mental wellbeing is impacted by the many interactions between their multiple roles—at home, at work, in their community and at university—and in larger contexts, in which factors, such as the culture of an institution, may impinge on or support and enhance students' mental wellbeing.

The Fellowship research provided the opportunity for mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia—a cohort often "unseen" as they go about their studies—to share their stories and have their perspectives heard. Being able to contribute to the research was valued by the student participants — many of whom noted that they volunteered their time to be interviewed because being a mature-aged student and being from a regional or remote area had its particular challenges, and they wanted to contribute to change and improvements.

The Fellowship drew upon the experiences and insights of approximately 1,800 student survey participants and 51 interviewees. The research findings (in Sections 4, 5 and 6) and discussion points (in Section 7) have been incorporated into recommendations and guidelines (in Sections 8 and 9). In most cases, the changes, recommendations and suggestions for proactive approaches are very achievable and come at little or no cost. Furthermore, if adopted, they will benefit *all* students.

This cohort of students is a diverse group with varying circumstances. The findings highlight the different ways that demographic characteristics, equity group and equity-like group membership, and type of attendance and study mode can intersect for university students. Large numbers of the survey and interview respondents undertook their studies fully online and at home in regional or remote locations. Smaller numbers relocated from regional or remote areas to major cities, but with the intention of returning home upon completion of their studies. Other students drove great distances to study face-to-face in their chosen course and to attend compulsory tutorials and laboratory classes. Many students had busy lives balancing their studies with parenting, work and community responsibilities. These students, typically women, carved out the space and time for study in snippets between their other commitments. Other students were less time poor and studying was "their time". Some of these students found that study helped them in their recovery from or management of major life events or situations, such as divorce, retirement and, in some cases, homelessness, or physical or mental illness (including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder).

Students' experiences varied widely. Some students could not fault their university experience; they felt known, catered for and connected, even thousands of kilometres away from their university. Other students, however, felt isolated, ignored and even patronised; in these cases, they managed their studies despite their university. In other situations, students' experiences were mixed; they were, for instance, empowered and enthralled by the learning process and supported by academic and professional staff and their peers, but simultaneously disempowered and disheartened by rigid rules (for example, around attendance and deadlines) or learning materials and online delivery that was difficult or impossible to access. The latter is one example of several "disjunctures" found in this research: a mismatch between the university assumptions that students can access, for instance, lectures (by streaming them) or attend online tutorials (using video conferencing software) and the reality of unreliable internet in many students' regional or remote locations, which often required time-consuming "work-arounds", such as driving to the nearest town to

use free and fast Wi-Fi in a local library in order to download materials from, or upload completed assessment tasks to, the learning management system (LMS).

A major finding of this research is the important role of teaching and learning in impacting student mental wellbeing; it is the everyday interactions that students have with teaching and support staff; their peers; the unit/subject content and curriculum; and the physical or online "classroom" that impact their mental wellbeing, whether it be positively, negatively or, as was often the case, both at the same time. University students' mental wellbeing is part of a complex web of interacting layers — some proximal to the student, others at a distance, but, nevertheless, all influential. Viewed in this way, it is evident that mental wellbeing is far more than an individual student's "problem" or the sole responsibility of Student Support Services; it is vital that mental wellbeing be supported at all layers and levels in the university ecosystem. *It is a teaching and learning issue; it is a support issue; it is a university cultural issue; it is everyone's business!*

The research findings also suggest that entrenched attitudes and expectations that favour and privilege some students (for example, younger students with time and who study on-campus) over others (for example, older students who juggle numerous commitments, and study online and part-time) continue to prevail. Challenges with course content or delivery, and with university rules and regulations, which were found to be unconsciously designed for so-called "ideal", "implied" and "traditional" students, exacerbated the already-challenging situations of students who did not fit this profile, such as mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote areas.

Providing access to higher education for students from equity and equity-like groups is only one step; equitable and inclusive practices are also required, so that *all* students, regardless of their age or geographical location, can participate fully in their studies and reach their full potential. Inclusive practices in teaching, learning and support offer ways of catering for the needs and strengths of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia and of proactively supporting and enhancing their mental wellbeing. Increased attention to these aspects could improve students' experiences, their learning and academic achievement, and, as a consequence, improve retention and success rates for universities.

The student participants' responses overwhelmingly focused on the importance of teaching and learning — that is, of the need for "the basics" to be done well to support their learning and mental wellbeing. Future research, however, needs to further interrogate the complexities and silences. For instance, while the student participants were not explicitly calling for large-scale mental health initiatives to improve their mental wellbeing—perhaps because examples of such potential initiatives were unknown to them—the data from this study points to the need for continued conversations with students, and ongoing thinking, research and development of approaches to supporting students' mental wellbeing. Finally, as pre-COVID-19 teaching and learning approaches and delivery are being problematised and reconfigured for a post-COVID-19 world, it is opportune to foreground mental wellbeing and equity in these conversations; future changes in this reconfiguring should be viewed through mental health and wellbeing, and equity lenses.

Illustration 9. Man with dog

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Appendix A: Fellowship Advisory Group

Table 10. Table of Fellowship Advisory Group

Name	Institution/state	Positions[32]
Dr Abi Brooker	University of Melbourne, Vic	Lecturer, Psychology /Teaching Specialist; Ethics & Wellbeing Hub; STARS Psychological Wellbeing network co-convenor
Dr Benjamin Veness	Vic	Medical Doctor, Writer; Churchill Fellow (university student mental health)
A/Prof Cathy Stone	NCSEHE/ University of Newcastle, NSW	Independent Consultant; 2016 NCSEHE Equity Fellow
Dr Christie White	University of Southern Queensland, QLD	Executive Director, Student Success and Wellbeing, Student Services; President ANZSSA
Dr Gareth Hughes	University of Derby, UK	Research lead for student wellbeing; Student Minds UK
Dr Judy Skene	WA	Independent Consultant (formerly Assoc. Director, Student Services, UWA)
Ms Kelly White	University of British Columbia, Canada	Wellness Coordinator, Student Wellbeing Promotion Unit
Ms Louise Pollard	The University of Notre Dame Aust., WA	Director, Division of Admissions & Student Services; 2017 NCSEHE Equity Fellow
A/Prof Lydia Woodyatt	Flinders University, SA	Senior Lecturer, Psychology; Flinders Retention Working Group; STARS Psychological Wellbeing network co-convenor
Mr Matt Brett	Deakin University, Vic	Director, Academic Governance and Standards; 2017 NCSEHE Equity Fellow
Dr Melinda Mann	Central Queensland University, QLD	Deputy Director, Student Life and Wellbeing Centre
Prof Mitch Parsell	University of Tasmania, Tas	Academic Executive Director
Dr Nicola Byrom	Kings College London, UK	Lecturer, Psychology; Founder, Student Minds UK
Prof Sally Kift	QLD	President, Australian Learning & Teaching Fellows (ALTF); Visiting Professorial Fellow, NCSEHE; Vice Chancellor's Fellow, Victoria University; Adjunct Professor: JCU, QUT, La Trobe University
Prof Sue Kilpatrick	University of Tasmania, Tas	Professor, Education; Equity Research & Innovation Panel, DESE

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[32] These were the advisory group members' positions at the end of June 2020.

Appendix B: Mental wellbeing models

Optimal mental health ("flourishing")

Optimal mental health with mental illness

Optimal mental health without mental illness

Serious mental illness ⟵⟶ **No mental Illness symptoms**

Poor mental health with mental illness

Poor mental health without mental illness

Poor mental health ("languishing")
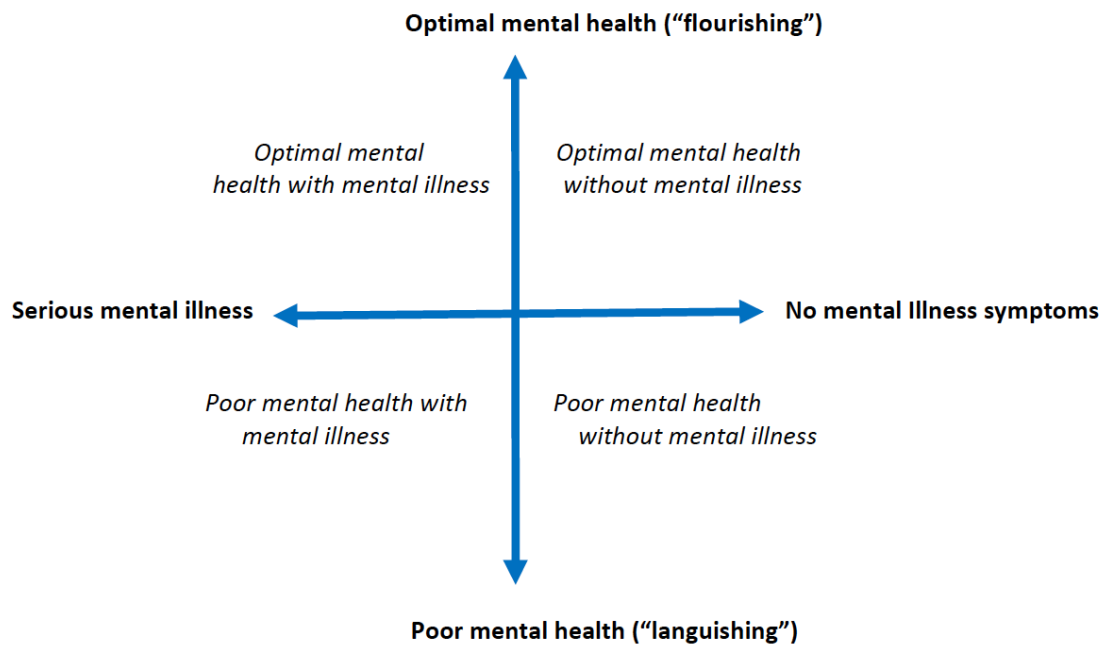
Figure 16. Dual continuum model in MacKean (2011, p. 11)

belonging — relationships — autonomous motivation — competence — autonomy = mental wellbeing
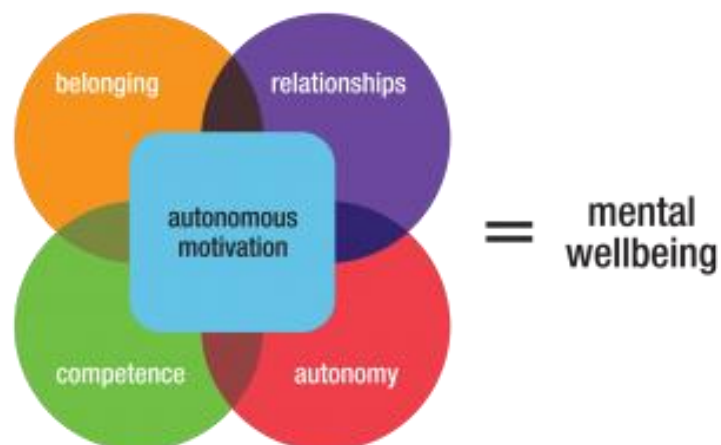
Figure 17. M-BRAC diagram in Baik et al. (2016c)

Appendix C: Interviewees

Table 11. Demographic information about the interviewees

Interview number	Pseudonym	Age band	Home state	Home remoteness category	Study mode (online; on-campus)	Degree/course
1	**Carolyn**	31-40	WA	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Psychology
2	**Lara**	41-50	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Dementia care
3	**Freya**	26-30	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Nursing
4	**Todd**	51-60	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Fine Arts
5	**Sabrina**	41-50	WA	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Health and community care
6	**Angela**	41-50	NT	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Hospitality management
7	**Jessica**	31-40	NT	RA3 Outer Regional	on-campus	Environmental Science
8	**Melinda**	61-70	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Dementia care
9	**David**	41-50	SA	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Arts
10	**Andrew**	61-70	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Environmental science
11	**Simon**	-	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	online, but has studied on-campus	Business and engineering
12	**Bridget**	41-50	TAS	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Psychology
13	**Edward**	-	SA	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Dementia care
14	**Paula**	31-40	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Radiography
15	**Amelia**	-	QLD	RA3 Outer Regional	online with on-campus practicals	Medical science
16	**Lydia**	41-50	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Arts
17	**Lynn**	-	SA	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Dementia care
18	**Don**	61-70	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus, but has studied online	Arts
19	**Joanna**	41-50	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Science
20	**Tess**	26-30	QLD	RA3 Outer Regional	online and on-campus	Nursing
21	**Pamela**	61-70	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Dementia care
22	**Liza**	41-50	WA	RA3 Outer Regional	on-campus	Biomedical science
23	**Gemma**	51-60	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Dementia care
24	**Peta**	-	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Psychology
25	**Tracy**	41-50	WA	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Business
26	**Olivia**	31-40	WA	RA4 Remote Australia	online with some on-campus	Education (primary)
27	**Andrea**	51-60	NSW	RA3 Outer Regional	on-campus	Nursing
28	**Gertrude**	61-70	VIC	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Dementia care
29	**Erica**	31-40	WA	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Science and law
30	**Julie**	41-50	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Education (primary)
31	**Penelope**	31-40	TAS	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Psychology
32	**Christopher**	31-40	QLD	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Business
33	**Ursula**	51-60	SA	RA3 Outer Regional	on-campus	Social work
34	**Judy**	-	WA	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Psychology
35	**Carlo**	51-60	VIC	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Design
36	**Barbara**	61-70	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Fine arts
37	**Liza**	51-60	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Development studies
38	**Simone**	31-40	NSW	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Education (primary)
39	**Beverley**	61-70	QLD	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Design

40	**Dianne**	41-50	WA	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Education (early childhood)
41	**Meggy**	31-40	NSW	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Social Sciences
42	**Michelle**	-	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Environmental science
43	**Kelly**	51-60	QLD	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Medical science
44	**John**	31-40	VIC	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Education (primary)
45	**Tamsin**	61-70	QLD	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Medical laboratory science
46	**Sharon**	-	TAS	RA3 Outer Regional	online, with on-campus for residentials and placements	Nursing
47	**Samuel**	26-30	NSW	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Education (primary)
48	**Melanie**	41-50	TAS	RA2 Inner Regional	on-campus	Education (primary)
49	**Laura**	31-40	TAS	RA2 Inner Regional	online	Nursing
50	**Susan**	41-50	NSW	RA3 Outer Regional	online	Law
51	**Alice**	26-30	QLD	RA3 Outer Regional	online with some on-campus	Nursing

Appendix D: National higher education student data[33]

Table 12. 2018 Domestic Undergraduate Participation: head count and proportion of students by geographical location and age (21+ commencers and all students, by first address)

	All domestic undergrads	Metro	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote / very remote
20 Years or under	359,718	293,116	44,769	19,094	2,318
20 years or under (%)	47.2	48.6	41.8	42.9	38.2
21 plus	402,307	310,174	62,240	25,373	3,750
21+ (%)	52.8	51.4	58.2	57.1	61.8
26 plus	177,636	128,395	32,513	13,911	2,379
26+ (%)	23.3	21.3	30.4	31.3	39.2
Total	762,025	603,290	107,009	44,467	6,068
All ages (%)	99.8[34]	79.2	14.0	5.8	0.8

Table 13. 2018 Domestic Undergraduate Participation: proportion of students by geographical location and age bands

	All areas	Metro	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote / very remote
21-25 (%)	29.5	30.1	27.8	25.8	22.6
26-30 (%)	8.4	8.2	9.0	9.2	10.7
31-40 (%)	8.6	7.9	11.3	11.6	15.9
41-50 (%)	4.3	3.6	6.7	7.0	8.8
51-60 (%)	1.5	1.2	2.5	2.7	3.1
61-70 (%)	0.4	0.3	0.7	0.7	0.6
71 plus (%)	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1

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[33] The national higher education student data is from the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). The data are from a customised data request (described in Section 3) for this NCSEHE Equity Fellowship research project.

[34] The missing 0.2% is "unidentified".

Table 14. 2018 Domestic Undergraduate Participation: proportion of Indigenous students by geographical location and age (21+ commencers and all students, by first address) and percentage of population who are Indigenous

	All areas	Metro	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote / very remote
Indigenous (%), all ages	1.9	1.3	3.1	5.3	11.2
Indigenous (%), 21+	2.9	2.0	4.1	7.3	15.1
% of population who are Indigenous[35]	3.3	1.7	4.4	7.9	30.0

Table 15. Combined SEIFA/ASGS data[36]

SES	Australia (2016)	Major Cities	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very Remote
Population (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
High SES (%)	25.0	32.6	7.0	4.5	7.0	1.8
Middle SES – 2 (%)	25.0	26.4	22.4	20.1	23.9	13.3
Middle SES – 3 (%)	25.0	22.0	32.4	32.4	32.9	32.0
Low SES (%)	25.0	19.0	38.2	43.1	36.2	52.9

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[35] The percentages in this row are calculated from data in the "Geographic distribution of the Indigenous population, 30 June 2016", Figure 2 data table (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019b).

[36] This table, generated by Paul Koshy, matches SA1 area ASGS definitions to the 2016 SEIFA data and shows averages for regional groupings.

Appendix E: Students' characteristics

Table 16. Students' characteristics, challenges and strengths

Study mode & attendance, Internet & travel					
Study mode & campus access	Study f2f at a regional campus	Study f2f at a Regional University Centre (RUC)	Study fully online	Study fully online, but have access to a RUC	Study f2f in a major city	Mixed mode
Type of attendance	Part-time study			Full-time study		
Computer & internet access	Access computers & free Wi-Fi at uni campus	Access RUC or local library's computers & free Wi-Fi		Access computer and Internet at home	Cannot rely on Internet bandwidth at home to stream lectures etc.	
Travel	Drive long distances for f2f classes	Study from home	Travel required to RUC/local library	Travel to/from city campus	Relocated to major city to study	
Responsibilities & commitments					
Parenting/ caring	Care for children	Care for parents		Other caring role	No caring role	
Work	Part-time work	Full-time work		Unpaid work	No paid work	
Community	Member of local community NGOs	Extended family/ community responsibilities & commitments		Involved in sport or other local club	Volunteer in local community	
Preparedness & awareness					
Preparedness for University	Completed an enabling/ preparation program prior to commencing UG	Attended orientation	Did not attend Orientation (live far away and work)	Had not studied for many years	Had studied at uni previously, so knew what to expect	
Awareness of services	Knew that the uni had learning skills advisors		Knew that the uni had counsellors & a disability unit		Had no awareness of uni support services	
Supports					
Supports (outside of uni)	Family support	Support from friends outside of uni	Support from colleagues	Family were un-supportive	Friends were un-supportive	Workplace was un-supportive
Community of learners	Belong to a community of learners on-campus (for example: within a discipline; a RUC; or a centre for Indigenous studies and student support)	Belong to a community of learners online		Belong to a community of learners through friends or colleagues	Isolated	
Mental health & disability					
Mental health & disability	Mental health condition is managed and study has a positive influence	Mental health condition is not managed	Adjustments and supports are in place (via disability unit)	Adjustments and supports are not in place	No mental health condition	

Strengths & attributes					
Insights from home life; work life and community	Lived experience of managing complexity	Cultural awareness and contrasting experiences from other countries and/or cultures	Life experience: raising a family; running a household; managing staff and teams	Theoretical insights encountered in workplace professional development	Understandings of policy effects from working in industries when policy change has been implemented

Appendix F: Survey question statistical test results

Table 17. Statistical test results

Variable	Did not consider deferring or withdrawing	Considered deferring or withdrawing	p-value
The teaching and learning environment (face-to-face or online) is stressful.			
Disagree or strongly disagree	440 (59.1)	241 (39.1)	<0.001
Agree or strongly agree	305 (40.9)	375 (60.9)	
I feel included in the teaching and learning environment (face-to-face or online).			
Disagree or strongly disagree	131 (17.8)	250 (29.4)	<0.001
Agree or strongly agree	604 (82.2)	385 (60.6)	
I have social connections with other students in my course			
Disagree or strongly disagree	318 (42.3)	405 (59.4)	<0.001
Agree or strongly agree	433 (57.7)	277 (40.6)	

Appendix G: A reflection on the pandemic

The last four months of this year-long Fellowship coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and the swift move to online teaching, learning and support in higher education. Overnight, the experiences of the students in this research—mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia—were relevant to *all* students. Their "normal" experiences of having their children climb over them while trying to listen to online lectures; of not having access to a study facility or to high-speed, affordable, reliable internet; or of needing to share devices with family members, were suddenly the experiences of many students and staff in metropolitan areas and all over the world.

We (academic and professional staff in higher education) must open our minds to students' realities, listen to their feedback, and have more empathy and understanding of their circumstances—especially students in equity groups and equity-like groups—and alter our expectations accordingly.

We need to reflect on the challenges experienced my many during COVID-19 who worked from home, while simultaneously trying to parent and home-school children, and have some compassion for students for whom this is their "normal". They might not have an alternative. The experiences of students in equity groups—who are often "out of sight and out of mind" at the best of times—must not fall "off the radar" while institutions have so many other urgent and ongoing concerns around COVID-19. In these times of falling employment, it is the students who already face many challenges and juggle so much who are likely to be facing even more difficulties. They are going to need more support, understanding and care, not less.

Mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia should be recognised and valued for the contributions they make at university and in their communities. In post-COVID-19 times, they must be taken seriously by universities and seen as core business. They should be for ethical and social justice reasons, but it also makes sense for economic reasons.

Some of the recommendations in this project, such as online provision of student services, would have seemed difficult or inconceivable pre-COVID-19. A positive from COVID-19 is that the quick pivot has shown what is possible. The conditions have been put in place; now we need to keep them and continue to improve them.

Launceston, Tasmania
29 June 2020