



# HIGHER EDUCATION GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE: Equitable student support during times of crisis

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# COVID 19 and impacts on higher education

Disasters at any scale, whether natural, economic, or societal, have disproportionately negative impacts on people from minoritised backgrounds. This inequity manifested in the higher education sector as the COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption for institutions and students alike.

The pandemic forced Australia to close international borders and experience rolling shutdowns. During 2020 alone, the higher education sector, worth 40 billion to the Australian economy, shed 17,300 jobs with a loss of an estimated \$1.8 billion (AUD) in revenue.<sup>1,2</sup> Universities pivoted learning to online and hybrid delivery. At the same time, universities endeavoured to support students during a time of great uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

Across Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened consciousness of student health and well-being and equity of access to learning.<sup>4</sup> The combined impact on students of the COVID-19 pandemic was multifaceted. Students navigated un/underemployment while experiencing difficulty maintaining motivation to remain engaged with studying and degree progression.<sup>1</sup> Despite financial constraints, Australian universities sought to further strengthen student support through medical, mental health, and well-being programs.

Australian universities also sought to ensure student equity of access to learning. What remains unclear in this evolving landscape are the range, efficacy, and uptake of approaches used. The research behind this guide therefore sought to understand how Australian universities have endeavoured to support students to retain equitable access to learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020.

## A note on language

This guide adopts the language of students/cohorts/groups from 'minoritised backgrounds' to shift from the deficit-laden 'minority students' and adopt people-first language. This language emphasises that minoritisation is a process of enforcing certain circumstances on groups of people through societal systems of oppression rather than an inherent trait of an individual or group.<sup>5</sup>

## Research Summary

See over page for a high-level summary of the research behind this guide. For full details of the study, please see the full National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Report by Mercer-Mapstone and colleagues (2022)<sup>6</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> Thatcher, Arran et al. (2020) Predicting the Impact of COVID-19 on Australian Universities. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 13(9), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Universities Australia (2021) 17,000 Uni jobs lost to COVID-19, Press Release, 3 February 2021, Universities Australia, Deakin, ACT.

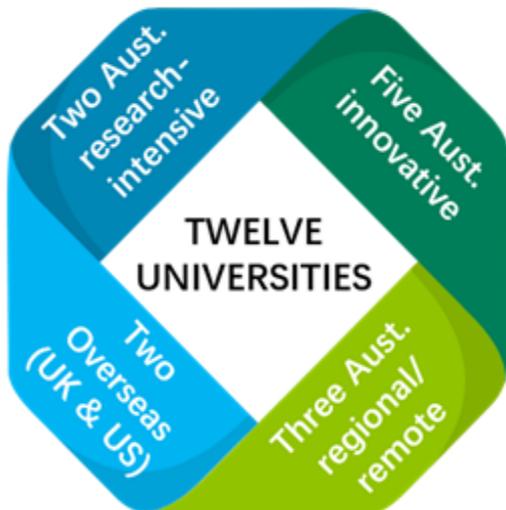
<sup>3</sup> Crawford, Joseph et al. (2020). [COVID-19: 20 countries' higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses](#). *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 3(1), 1–20.

<sup>4</sup> Goodwin, Lindsey N. and Truebridge, Sara. (2021) Wellbeing from the outside-in: How mirror flourishing elevates collective wellbeing both within and beyond the classroom. *Wellbeing and Resilience Education*. ed M. A. White and F. McCallum. London, UK: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Patton Davis, Lori., & Museus, Samuel. (2019). [Identifying and disrupting deficit thinking](#). National Center for Institutional Diversity, University of Michigan.

<sup>6</sup> Mercer-Mapstone, Lucy et al. (2022) [Recommendations for equitable student support during disruptions to the higher education sector: lessons from covid-19](#). National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

# THE RESEARCH ON A PAGE

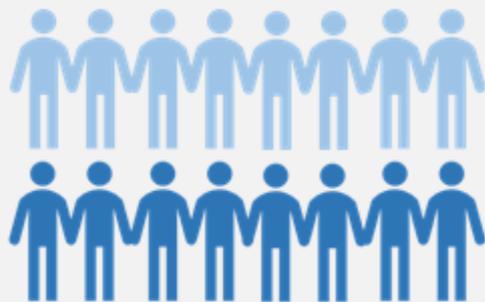


## COVID-19 IMPACTS ON...

- Students' learning, wellbeing, and financial situation?
- How institutions adapted to equitably support students?
- Differences in experiences between minoritised & non-minoritised students?

WHAT DID WE ASK?

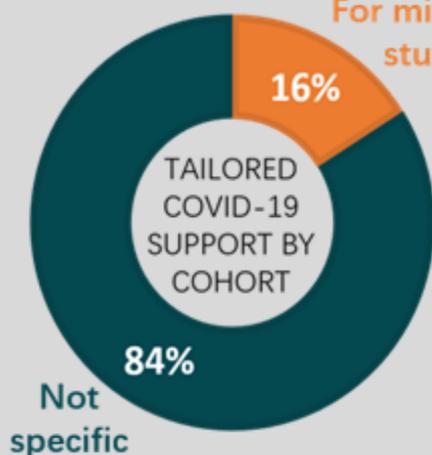
WHAT DID WE DO?



2524 students surveyed

164 university COVID-19 artefacts analysed, recording 865 unique supports

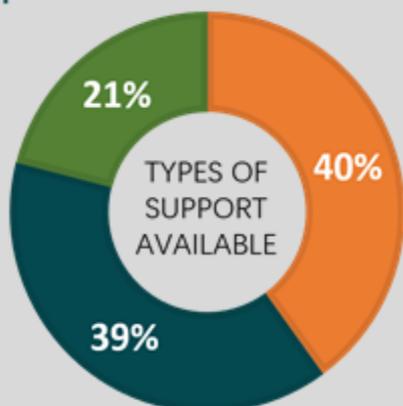
For minoritised students



## KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- Almost three quarters of all students said their **learning experience** got a little/lot worse during the pandemic
- Students from minoritised backgrounds were significantly more likely to say their **financial situation** and **wellbeing** got a lot worse during the pandemic compared to students from non-minoritised backgrounds
- Students with **intersectional identities** were most likely to say their learning experience, financial situation, and wellbeing got a lot worse during the pandemic compared to their peers
- Students from minoritised backgrounds also indicated lower **sense of belonging** than students from non-minoritised backgrounds because of the pandemic
- Students from minoritised backgrounds were more likely to **use support** when they were aware of it than their non-minoritised peers
- Students from minoritised backgrounds were less likely to be **aware of supports** in most areas than their non-minoritised peers



Learning Wellbeing Financial

# Recommendations for Practice

## Learning and Teaching

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Maintain face to face learning for essential activities where possible**
- **Transition new and expanded quality hybrid/hyflex/blended learning approaches to business as usual to retain accessibility and flexibility in learning opportunities.**
- **Support the ongoing professional development of educators to continue to improve new ways of teaching and learning.**

Learning online was described as both one of the best and one of the worst aspects of students' experiences during the pandemic. Where learning online was a positive experience, it facilitated better grades, greater enjoyment and wellbeing, and deeper connections among students and staff. Where learning was a negative experience, it resulted in decreased grades, increased stress and poor mental health, and feelings of isolation and alienation.

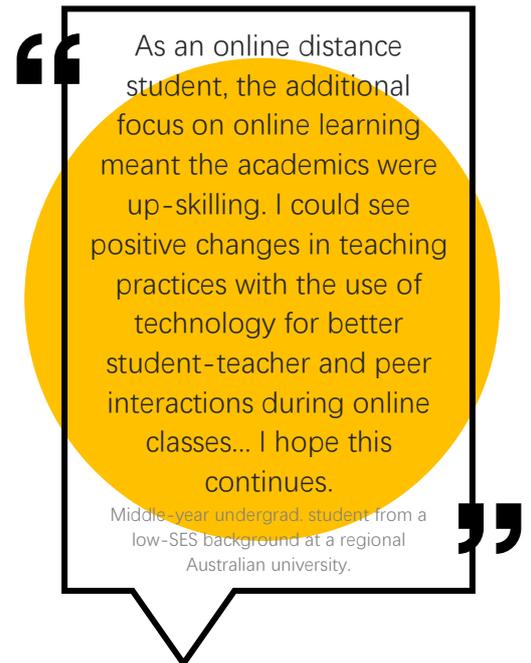
Where students reported benefits to their learning during the pandemic, the increased flexibility and accessibility associated with the shift to remote/online/blended delivery were key factors. These benefits prompted ripple benefits which enhanced wellbeing and financial situations, particularly for students from minoritised backgrounds. The quality of the learning experience was predominantly shaped by the capacity of the institution to provide access to high quality learning resources and the individual capacity of teachers to create engaging online environments, particularly for students from minoritised backgrounds.

#### Learning support: what did universities do?

Universities most frequently offered supporting initiatives that enabled students to retain access to their education including online or alternate study spaces. 40% of all support mechanisms recorded were designed to support learning with 51% of supports openly accessible for all students, 14% were by application, and access to 34% was unclear.

Other supports provided by universities included:

- Access to e-readings rather than textbooks
- Additional/alternate physical study spaces
- Additional/alternate virtual study spaces
- Online learning resources
- Online support for academic learning (e.g., Additional help with assignments)
- Increased flexibility to assessment practices
- Peer tutoring/study assistance/mentoring
- Hands-on support for learning
- Targeted spaces such as 'Assistive technology rooms'
- Targeted support staff



### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create tailored and accessible support mechanisms for students from minoritised and intersectional backgrounds that holistically consider learning, wellbeing, and financial situations.**
- **Respond to disparate feelings of belonging and wellbeing**

The deep interrelationship between wellbeing and students' enjoyment of and outcomes from learning is well established. As this study (re)affirmed, students experienced major challenges during the pandemic that contributed to declining student wellbeing and worsening financial situations. While universities did their best to support students, it was clear that both were areas in need of significantly more resources to meet escalating student needs.

Our findings identified that universities created new and adjusted pre-existing supports as the pandemic progressed. However, very few supports were targeted specifically for students from minoritised backgrounds—only 16% across all institutions. Tailoring of supports had a significant, positive impact for minoritised students and in universities where contextualised support was absent, the divide deepened.

The pressure from changes to student wellbeing and declining financial situations also had a direct effect on student learning. Students reported this contributed to grade reductions, program withdrawals, stress, poor mental health, and overall dissatisfaction. We found a strong interdependence among different areas of support—that is, when students' financial situations were supported so was their wellbeing and learning and vice versa.

#### **Wellbeing support: what did universities do?**

Wellbeing support comprised 39% of all support offered to students. Most wellbeing supports were openly accessible (61%), 12% were by application, while access was unclear in 27% of cases.

Counselling online and online wellbeing services in addition to counselling (e.g., peer group chats) were the two most common types of wellbeing supports offered. Listed below are the categories of wellbeing support made available to students across institutions.

“ The university could have made mental health resources more available to students & staff. I found COVID more taxing on my personal state than on my academic state. This in turn lowered my grades. ”

Final year undergrad, student from an intersectional background (LGBTQIA+ & racially minoritised) at an Australian research-intensive university



- Counselling online
- Wellbeing services online in addition to counselling (e.g., Peer group chats)
- Call out campaigns to check in on students
- Non-academic engagement activities (e.g., Online trivia)
- Employability activities (e.g., Online career events)
- Wellbeing discussions/support within academic classes
- Targeted health initiatives such as accommodation-specialist Zoom or other online drop-in sessions and interpersonal violence response and safety
- Targeted social initiatives such as Online College Fairs and student chat hubs
- Targeted external sites for referrals such as care packages available from government/charities and grief and loss support agencies

### Financial support: what did universities do?

Financial support for students was offered by all universities, though at about half the rate (21%) of other types of wellbeing or learning support. Financial support in the form of loans, schemes, or grants followed by emergency fund provision such as no-interest loans were the two most common types of financial supports offered. Listed below are the categories of financial support made available to students across institutions.

- Bursaries
- Fee waivers (Student Services Amenities Fee or tuition fees) or freezing of tuition fees
- Emergency fund provision (e.g., No interest loan or rental assistance)
- Loan of technology (e.g., Provision of laptops, microphone, Wi-Fi dongles etc.)
- Food packages
- Housing initiatives such as rent assistance.

## Communications

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Ensure central communications are concise, personalised for segmented target cohorts, and conveyed through multiple communication modalities**
- **Centre intersectionality as both a concept *and method* for engaging with and supporting students**

Student dissatisfaction with university communication strategies is an ongoing issue with effective, targeted, and timely communication of support availability known to enhance student wellbeing.<sup>7</sup> Best practice strategies in digital communications include demonstrating compassion, seeking feedback, limiting message bombardment, and celebrating small victories,<sup>8</sup> but these were found to be lacking in both the artefacts analysed and in student experiences. Students reported strong preferences for how universities communicated during times of crisis such as COVID-19. Impersonal and lengthy communications were not well received by students and students highly valued shorter asset-oriented communications tailored to their personal circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> Baik, Chi, Larcombe, Wendy, and Brooker, Abi. (2019). [How universities can enhance student mental wellbeing: the student perspective](#). Higher Education Research and Development. 38(4), 674-687.

<sup>8</sup> O'Hara, Ross. (2020). [4 best practices for excellent digital communications](#). Educause Review.

Effective navigation through a pandemic for students from minoritised backgrounds was supported by succinct, timely communication that provided direct information regarding the various support mechanisms and how to access these quickly. Blanket, generic communications lacked the nuance required to equitably serve students from minoritised backgrounds and made students feel unseen and undervalued. This also contributed to a lack of awareness of support and underutilisation of support across student cohorts, though particularly for those from minoritised backgrounds.

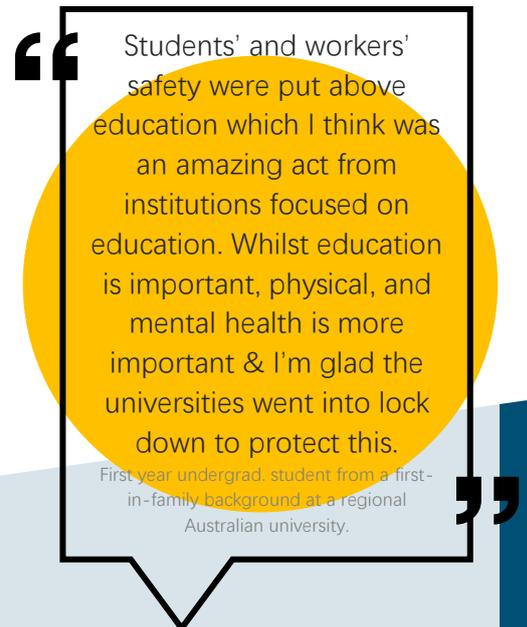
## Policy and Procedures

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Explore adapted approaches to decision-making and governance structures to meet the needs of different crisis stages**
- **Embed structures to facilitate cross-sector practice sharing and opportunities for sector level evaluation, reflection, and revision of protocols established during the pandemic to better prepare for future crises**
- **Sustain student support changes made during the pandemic to (re)build our sector with an explicit focus on equity as core business.**

Students' responses overwhelmingly described a deepening divide in inequity. All institutions in our sector are shaped by the same systems of oppression but respond in different ways to supporting students who face barriers to equitable access to learning. We must fight the urge to revert to 'normal' pre-pandemic philosophies, policies, systems, and procedures within our organisations' microcosms of societal systems of oppression.

We are faced with a powerful opportunity to share practice and (re)build our sector with an explicit focus on equity as 'core business', putting in place approaches to ensure all students can thrive in ways which are identity conscious. This is an opportunity to emerge from the pandemic as a sector of learning where equality and humanity can flourish.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>9</sup> Peters, Michael A. (2021). [Reimagining the new pedagogical possibilities for universities post-Covid-19](#). Educational Philosophy and Theory.