

“ON THE RADAR”: SUPPORTING THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF MATURE-AGED STUDENTS IN REGIONAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA

EQUITY FELLOWSHIP REPORT

GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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

Guidelines and Recommendations

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Introduction

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.

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. Three methods of data collection were employed: i) national higher education student data; ii) a student survey; and iii) student interviews.¹ 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.

A variety of factors were found to impact 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%).

Taking an ecological systems 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. 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.

The Equity Fellowship Report is on the NCSEHE website: https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Crawford-Equity-Fellowship-Report_FINAL.pdf. The research findings and discussion inform the “Guidelines for proactively supporting student mental wellbeing” and the “Recommendations for universities and government”. The guidelines and recommendations are described in the following pages and in the Report (Sections 8 and 9).

¹ Please note that all of the data collection took place prior to COVID-19 reaching Australia and impacting university course delivery.

Guidelines for proactively supporting student mental wellbeing²

The guidelines 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.

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, circumstances and strengths.
2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring.
3. Implement principles of inclusive education and/or universal design in the curriculum.³
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.



Night time

²Some information in points 2, 4 and 8 appear in Crawford, N. (2020). Supporting student wellbeing during COVID-19: Tips from regional and remote Australia. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/student-wellbeing-covid-19-regional-remote-australia/>

³The wording of Guideline 3 has been changed slightly since the Report was published in April 2021.

1. Know your students: understand their diverse challenges, circumstances 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)

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.

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.

Proactive approaches

Be approachable and proactive in supporting students. Check in with students semi-regularly in a personalised way via email. Depending on your staff-to-student ratio, you could check in via phone—say once a semester—particularly with the students who cannot make synchronous sessions. You could make a point of emailing the group to forewarn them that lecturer/tutor A, B, C plans to call them at a certain time that week. The students will likely have questions and be extremely grateful for your call; leave a message if they don't answer — they'll be chuffed that you care. Alternatively, consider recording a short (two-minute) video at the end of the week—summing up the week's focus and introducing the next topic (a few times per semester, especially around assessment time)—it is a way to check in with large numbers of students, and for online students to see you.



Waiting

3. Implement principles of inclusive education and/or universal design in the curriculum

[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.

Proactive approaches

Design your teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks with mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia (in all of their diversity) in mind. For example: design content and assessment tasks with room for students to contextualise it to their geographical location, so they can make it applicable to their region and future employment plans, which are likely to be in the area in which they are located.

In designing your course, teaching and learning materials, and assessment tasks, ask yourself and your teaching team: Who are we including? Who are we excluding?

It is important to apply an equity lens and think about the diverse needs of students in your course and endeavour to accommodate all students. Teach for diversity and take an inclusive approach to teaching and learning by implementing principles of inclusive education and/or universal design for learning, and universal design in assessment. These approaches will help you to cater for all of your students.

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 Learning Management Systems (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 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.



Internet Challenge

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.

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

I was absolutely exhausted [during] 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.



Kombi and free Wi-Fi

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 in the Report). 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 3, 4 and 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.

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. 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 [the] website and [I was] 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 of the Report). 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.



Small Actions

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 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.

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.

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; and being a role model to family, friends and community members is enormous, and they deserve to be recognised as assets rather than burdens.

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) 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.

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.

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.



Internet - hit and miss

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.

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 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.



Staff mental wellbeing