

Admission and success for low SES university students

Report on a HEPPP 2018 National Priorities Pool Project

Editors: David Kember and Robert A. Ellis

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Chapter 11

Student perceptions of support in the contemporary model of higher education

Allison Trimble, Si Fan and David Kember

Introduction

One of the outcomes from the self-reports by students in Chapter 10 was the recognition that not all students were aware of the range and scope of services available to support their experience at university. In this chapter, the experience of students in another of the participating institutions suggests that the existence of different levels of support across the institution indicates that a stratification of the right type of support at the right level in the institution might provide one way of improving student awareness and access to support. The benefit of this approach is hypothesised to be that a centralisation and coordination of services can achieve economies of scale, but a holistic approach also recognises that not all services should be, or can be, delivered centrally. Some are best delivered locally by stakeholders, in the program or departmental context, if students are to recognise and access such services.

Method

The data for this study came from interviews with 41 undergraduate students at UTAS. UTAS has been characterised as a university very close to the contemporary end of the spectrum (see Chapter 3). It is pertinent to note that the interviewed students were nearly all online students, which is a significant feature of the contemporary model. Four students were formally enrolled as on-campus students, but the units investigated in the interviews were flipped-classroom blended learning units. A major part of the study of these students was, therefore, through the online mode.

The interviews were wide-ranging, as will be seen from the case studies compiled from them. This chapter concentrates on aspects of the interviews relevant to support. Support is considered as a holistic construct. The interviews, as evidenced by the case studies, suggested that the experience of contemporary university students involved a broader range of facets of support than that of students in universities adhering to the traditional model. The analysis of the interview data suggested a five-level category scheme for areas of support, with external support having subcategories of family and friends, and work colleagues.

Student perceptions of different areas of support

Taking the transcripts as a whole, the researchers identified different areas of support that seemed to capture the students' perceptions of the type and location of support available to them in their studies. Figure 11.1 provides a visual representation of the different areas.

Figure 11.1: Five areas of support for students

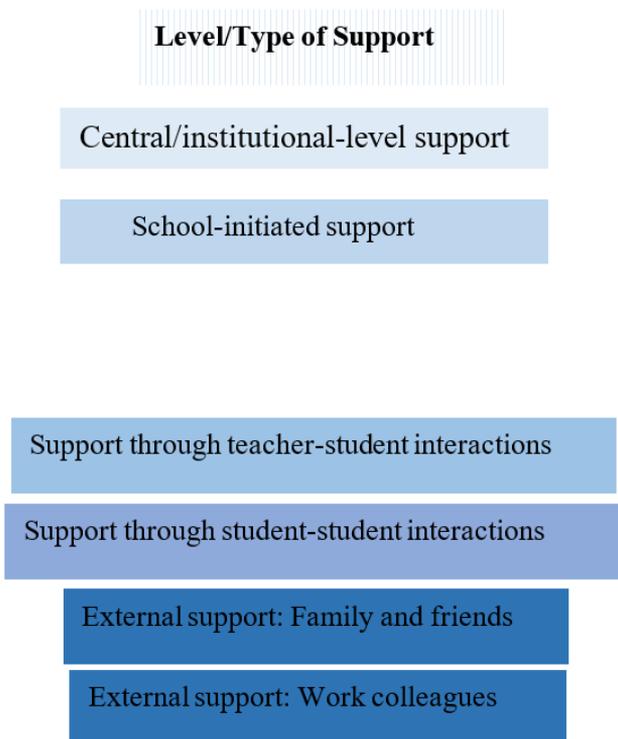


Figure 11.1 presents the five areas of support (institutional, school, teacher, student and external) with the external source divided into two areas. The first four areas can be conceptualised as levels and an expression of a stratified model for support delivery within the institution. The diagram shows a gap between the top two areas and the remainder. This will be explained towards the end of this chapter.

In reporting the quotations below describing student support, some use will be made of frequency counts, that is the number of times participants made reference to a type or area of support. A degree of caution needs to be attached to these counts as the qualitative sample was not statistically representative. However, 41 interviews constitute a substantial qualitative sample. The counts do seem helpful as relative measures, indicating the main foci of support, as reported by the online students. The counts, in conjunction with the researchers' experience of what was said in the interviews, generally suggested consistent conclusions.

The following quotations offer illuminating examples of institutional support, support offered through schools, support from teachers, support from other students, and support received from external sources such as at home and in the workplace.

Central/institutional level support

Support offered to students on commencement of their degrees is a common experience amongst all participating institutions. In the university referred to in this chapter, there was a range of positive and negative perceptions relating to the services offered. Three students reported attending orientations or the Unistart programme, which are held on campus. The reactions were quite positive.

Five participants reported involvement in meetings with counsellors or student services. Three found the experience to be fairly positive, but two were very negative. The significant feature of the

meetings was that all took place on campus: 'I did come and see a career counsellor'; 'I went to a counsellor'; and, 'I went to Student Services'.

The participants made no mention of central support services reaching out to online or off-campus students. If there were central services available to online or remote students, the participants were either not aware of the services, or did not consider them pertinent to them as online students.

School-initiated support

The participants reported on two support schemes for students initiated at the School level. Participants who had been involved in these schemes were nominated by the leaders of the two initiatives.

The first scheme was a mentoring scheme for first year BA students. The mentors were lecturers in the School of Humanities. Five interviews were conducted with students who were identified as having taken part of this scheme. Two, however, were unsure if they had been contacted by a mentor.

So there may be a mentor, I probably have been spoken to about that, but it's just in one ear, out the other.

Yeah, she said any issues just to contact her, or any questions ... Because like I said, I totally forgot that I had her there in my corner.

The other three indicated that they had no need for such a scheme: 'I didn't really need any help'; and, 'but I just haven't needed to, and I haven't done them yet because I don't have to'.

The other School-initiated scheme, by the School of Education, was one for conditionally managed students, identified as at-risk. The students were contacted by the School's Director of Engagement or another lecturer in the school. The aim was to help the students take steps to meet their study commitments. There were four interviews with students who were nominated for the scheme.

One student found the experience very helpful.

I had some personal issues which were affecting my study I guess. It had an impact on my grades, and so the university noticed that. And so, [Director of Engagement] contacted me and we started to make a study plan and that was to get me back on track. Which really did help. I think if it wasn't for that study plan and the interactions I had with [the Director of Engagement] I probably wouldn't be continuing my study as of right now.

The other three participants could be classified as finding the scheme peripheral to their needs.

It's just nice to know that someone was sort of interested, I suppose. But I don't know that you'd really call it support in the academic sense. It's more just to keep an eye on.

In general, both School-initiated schemes seemed to struggle to integrate their services easily into the online study experience. The sphere of influence of the School-initiated schemes was perceived by students as having limited overlap with their online study. The School-initiated schemes seemed to have limited impact because the students did not perceive them to be an integral part of their online study environment.

Support through teacher-student interaction

Teachers as a source of support was a common theme amongst a large majority of the interviews. Thirty-five of the 41 participants commented upon teacher-student interaction as a form of support. All these interviewees made positive comments about the support they had received through the teaching of a unit they had taken. Five of the interviewees referred to units they had taken where the level of interaction and support was not of the same standard as that they had received in the units for which their reactions have been positive.

Very significantly, and unlike other support levels, there was not a single comment that support through teacher-student interaction was not needed. The participants consistently described support through teacher-student interaction as a multifaceted phenomenon, with teachers employing several strategies. There was not a single comment that one of the facets or strategies was not necessary.

Clearly, support through teacher-student interaction is the key to the support of online students. It is the support level which is the most important by far. Teacher-student interaction is the form of support which will have the most influence on the retention and success of online students.

There are a number of dimensions which seemed to shape the nature of teacher-student interaction: optimising the nature of the support, teacher presence online, the approachability and responsiveness of the teacher, perceptions of the teacher and student being part of a learning community, the extent to which the design of the online experience enabled learning, and the quality and nature of the interaction.

Optimising teacher-student interaction as a form of support

Having reached this conclusion about the importance of teacher-student interaction in enhancing the retention and success of online students, it is clearly important to address the issue of how to teach online in such a way that the students perceived the experience as a positive form of support. The interviews were, therefore, examined for key themes about aspects of teacher-student interaction which the students found supportive. Five main themes emerge from the analysis. These are reported below with quotations used to illustrate and substantiate the facets of supportiveness.

The concluding chapter briefly introduces a model of teacher student interaction as a form of support, derived from a more in-depth analysis of this part of the data.

Teacher presence

For teacher-student interaction to be perceived by students as providing effective support, the teachers needed to project their presence and personality. This can be challenging as that presence has to be projected through the online medium.

Her and [tutor] did an actual video of themselves, so that made it feel like you were actually on the campus with them, that you're sitting there in a tutorial with them. So having a face to a name, and then working off each other and being really relaxed about it all, it just gives you that relaxed feeling, and I truly believe if you are relaxed and excited about something, you'll try harder, as opposed to if you're scared and nervous and anxious.

Larger enrolment units are taught by the lecturer, together with one or more tutors. For the support to be perceived as effective, the lecturer and tutors need to work together as a team.

Ideally, the students needed to feel that the lecturers and tutors knew them as individuals. This can be a challenge in larger enrolment online units, where interactions take place at a distance. The quotation below, and those in the following three sections, show that the challenge was being met.

I feel like she knew me. She knew me as person, ... not the, all of her students, she's just specific to address to me. And I feel good. That I feel like she pays attention, she cares about me.

Approachability

For teacher-student interaction to be an effective form of support, the lecturers and tutors needed to be perceived as approachable.

So, she was really available. The moment I said "Look, you know. I just would like to...". Actually, she offered to talk through my assignment and what I had done wrong and where the failure had come from and she helped me understand what I needed to do. And, so I found her quite accessible, which I think yes, was her strength.

As the lecturers were at a distance from their students, it was necessary for them to be approachable through available media.

If you need any support, you can email, you can Skype, or use any of those platforms, or your educator. ... I never felt alone. It was so fantastic.

Responsiveness

Online students are at a distance from their teachers and studying as individuals. When they have queries, they need lecturers and tutors who are responsive.

[Lecturer] is very responsive. ... I couldn't think about putting myself in that situation and responding to so many posts all the time. ... I know from other people's responses that she was always very responsive.

The main channels for responding to students were through emails and discussion boards. Students need quick responses as the queries are usually about topics which are not understood or places where they have got stuck. A slow response would hold up their study.

Whenever I emailed [lecturer], she was always answered my emails within half an hour, and whenever I have anything going on in my mind, if I had any questions or any hardship I always just ask her.

I valued, he'd always be quick to respond to where we post our discussions, and I valued his input and ways that I can improve in my thinking or what he likes about my thinking and beliefs, which was good.

The thing I appreciated about [lecturer] was she was very active on the discussion board. Especially towards assignment time we had a few pieces of assessment that people had a lot of questions about. ... so that was really helpful because obviously they're in those last few, sort of, that last 24 hours before an assessment is due in, and something pops up in regards to the topic, you couldn't stop writing. And she was very fast with that.

Responsiveness could also be channelled through a variety of media.

They did a few webinars, where you actually get to do face time with them and a couple of the other groups, so you got to actually say hello and have a chat, and emails, they were always good with emails. If you emailed them about things, it would be like two, three days tops before you heard back from either [lecturer] or [tutor].

Responsiveness – pastoral

If approachability was well established, and the lecturer was prepared to be highly responsive, the teacher-student interaction could have a pastoral role.

When I started it was nerve-wracking. Like I was in tears and I was like, ‘Oh my God. I can’t do this, I need to pause, I don’t want to continue.’ ...The lecturer that I did have, I would ... I think I sent her, like, 100 emails or something saying that ‘I don’t think I can do this’, and she actually called me and she said, ‘No, you can.’

Learning community

The aim of establishing a teacher presence and being both approachable and responsive was to establish a learning community. Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) model of attrition posits that retention is enhanced through social and academic integration. The model was based on research into on-campus students taught face-to-face. It is not been clear how social and academic integration could be achieved with online and distance students. The evidence in this main section suggests that integration can be achieved and online communities formed through high quality teacher-student interaction.

There was definitely one educator in my first year and she was brilliant. You could tell that she really loved teaching and she loved making her classroom and the unit feel like a community. Like a learning community.

Learning design

Connectivity and interaction needs to be incorporated into the learning design. This facet of support through teacher-student interaction is worthy of being further investigated and developed. This subsection includes quotations showing how sound learning design can facilitate student learning, as well as promoting teacher-student interaction and building a learning community.

The first quotation shows how content can be explained and a teacher presence established at the same time.

Each week, the two lecturers did a video of them talking and explaining the content, and I really liked that. No other subject that I’ve ever done has done that, and I thought that was really, really good, especially for the online people. I mean, to just see them talking, and you felt like you were face to face talking with them, as silly as that sounds, but yes, it was really good. I really liked that.

A variety of media forms, types of activity and involvement of others was beneficial, as it made the study more interesting.

One of my most favourite ones so far had a really broad range of ways we presented things. So, we, you know, did videos for some things, we presented written things for others. He brought in specialists to do short lectures. He did conversations with other experts. And so, it was always changing and engaging, but it wasn’t just the standard “Let’s listen to this, let’s read this and play this.”

Active engagement is important. Again, it is preferable to have a variety of activities.

It was really great that [lecturer] always tended to give us a weekly activity on top of the discussion board because it was more entertaining because it gave you a goal to work towards. With the maths, there was a maths problem each week. Then there was also the discussion board and our reading. She also kept in contact with us. So if we possibly were confused by what was going on and we may have answered incorrectly, she was, “Come and learn this,” explained things to us appropriately, without talking down to us, or without something down our throats.

For teacher-student interaction to be an effective form of support for online learners, there needs to be communication channels which allow interaction. Webinars are ideal because they are an online form of a seminar or interactive tutorial.

I think webinars are great because it does connect you personally to the group and to the tutor or the lecturer.

Learning design – organised

Effective learning design features a variety of different elements. These need to be combined on the LMS platform in a well organised manner. It needs to be clear to the distance students how to work through the learning elements in a systematic manner.

I was looking at my new units coming up, and even they are so well-structured and organised and friendly, and I'm feeling really excited about starting because I already feel ready. ... These two I looked at yesterday, wow, they are so prepared.

Nature of teacher-student interaction

The important conclusion to this section is that teacher-student interaction is the key form of support for online learners. The students' online learning experience is shaped by the quality of the interaction with their teachers and tutors. The level of support which is most influential on retention and success is teacher-student interaction.

Given this conclusion, it is important to make clear what is meant by teacher-student interaction in online learning. It needs to be interpreted as a broad multifaceted form of learning environment. The interviews suggested that richer learning environments were more successful in promoting academic and social engagement and interaction.

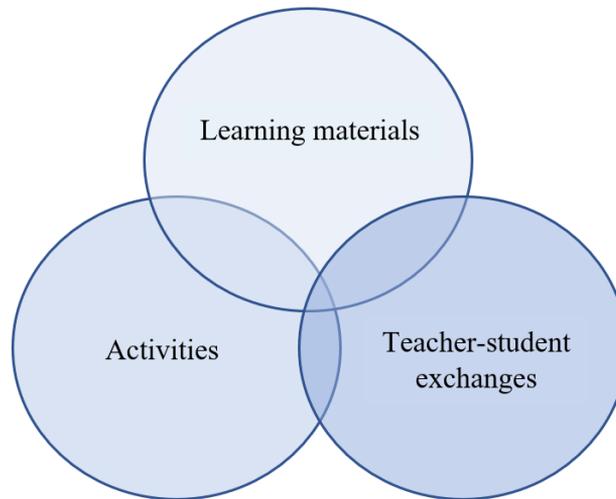
The teacher-student interaction level of support includes all the materials available through the LMS site for the unit being taught. The learning materials can take a wide variety of forms, and be presented through various media. Examples include, but are certainly not limited to: online text; readings from set texts or articles; videos by lecturers and tutors; other online videos; and links to websites.

Teacher-student interaction encompasses all the activities built into the LMS site. This includes all the tasks students are asked to complete; both online activities and formal pieces of assessment. Important activity-type elements are the discussion forums, which are usually pre-set into the LMS site at appropriate points.

The other aspects of support through teacher-student interaction are the direct interactions between students and teachers, including both lecturers and tutors. These come in several forms, including emails and posts through discussion forums. Phone calls or discussion through communication software are common. There are also webinars and web conferences via video conference software.

The three main aspects of the teacher-student interaction level of support clearly overlap. This is envisaged in the diagram below as three overlapping elements of teacher-student interaction in online learning.

Figure 11.2: The three overlapping elements of teacher-student interaction in online learning



Student-student interaction

Some 35 participants mentioned student-student interaction; just one less than the number citing teacher-student interaction. However, whereas all those participants envisaged teacher-student support as a key essential form or level of support, the reactions to, and degree of engagement through, student-student interaction varied considerably. This variation is the main consideration of this section. The reactions are considered in terms of engager behaviour, lurking, avoidance, perceptions of the learning community and encouraging positive engager behaviour through meaningful activities.

Engager behaviour

Engaging behaviour was where students were active on discussion boards and fully engaged in online activities. Engagers saw this as a useful way to learn from each other, or a form of collaborative learning.

I found that if I really needed to ask any questions or if I wanted to find out if anyone else was having trouble with the same things I was, it was really nice to get in touch with everyone. So, it's nice to have a forum where everyone can talk to each other without necessarily knowing each other. Just the fact that we have the same goals in common and that we need to finish and get rid of it, the course sort of thing. ... So, I was getting advice from other students and it was like a collaboration with other people.

This form of communal learning could lead to students connecting online. Initial discussion forums commonly ask students to introduce themselves. This facilitates making connections based on similar backgrounds or employment.

We introduced ourselves on the discussion board, and I responded to a few people because I found that it's been quite nice actually. By doing those introductions, you can see where everyone else is coming from, so there were a few mums returning to study that had young children, so I could relate to that. It just made me feel like I'm not the only one doing it, because I guess with online, it can be quite isolating if you don't make use of that resource and those connections, so that was really good, having that introductory week and that task to introduce ourselves and what we're doing and things like that, so that was really good.

Lurking behaviour

Lurkers were those who looked at postings, but did not themselves contribute to the discussion boards. Lurkers found the discussions and postings of value and reported learning from them. The dilemma, of course, is that, if all students display lurking behaviour, there would be no postings in the discussion board for the lurkers to read.

I've never posted. I just look at them.

If I was confused, I'd just go have a look in there and see if other people had the same questions and then it was answered, so that saved me from having to send an email off.

I found it really useful to read other peoples. I didn't feel great about not being – not contributing the way others did, but I found it was very time consuming for myself.

Avoiding behaviour

There were also students who admitted to avoiding behaviour or observed others displaying it. Avoiding behaviour is characterised by neither engaging in online discussion forums, nor reading the posts of others as a form of learning. The rationale or excuse for this behaviour was usually that the student did not have time.

Engagement, socialising, interacting, all that sort of thing, that's, it sounds terrible but it's also extra time and effort, that I don't really have.

I don't jump on every single day. I don't have access to it or I don't have time for it. So you can miss valuable chunks, or you feel like you're behind the eight ball because your colleagues might have all been on yesterday.

Learning community

It was observed in the previous section, that teacher-student interaction could promote learning communities. Student-student interaction could also contribute to the formation of learning communities. This is important as such communities are a key factor in the promotion of social and academic engagement.

The unit feels like a community. Like a learning community.

It felt like a real community of people in there that were very supportive of each other. It flowed really well.

Encouraging engager behaviour through meaningful activities

Whether students displayed engaging, lurking, or avoiding behaviour, appeared, to a significant degree, to be a function of individual differences. There was also, though, evidence that teachers could encourage engager behaviour through designing meaningful activities. Well-designed activities could encourage interaction.

We did lots of different activities so it was very helpful for us to interact. We had a lot of brainstorming. A lot of like group activities and then splitting up into different groups, so we could meet different people, that sort of thing, which I found really, really good.

There also had to be a genuine purpose to the activity, so that students felt that it was worth spending time engaging with it. The activity, therefore, needed to be related to the key learning outcomes or the assessment.

So, the other key thing in that unit that hadn't been brought up in other units was that [lecturer] encouraged people to work together for assignments, not that it was a shared assignment, but to meet. And, you know, I've read research that shows it's a key strategy for, you know, encouraging persistence in learning, especially for mature age and isolated students.

The final area considered is the support sought by students from external sources.

External support from family and friends, and work colleagues

For online and distance students, support from external sources is an important form of support, as study often takes place in the home or work environment. These sources of support are considered in pastoral, academic and multifaceted terms.

Pastoral support from partners and family

Partner support was an important form of external support. If partners provide financial support and/or take responsibility for household chores, it frees up time for the student to study.

For as long as I'm in my academic pursuit, my partner will support me her way. And once I'm done and in my own career, then she can relax, and really sit back, and maybe work a day or two if she wants to.

My husband's been helping me do lots of household chores, so I've got more time to study. So, he's been really supportive and that's been really good. I don't have to wash up anymore. So, it's less work for me.

This support could also be extended to include the other family members, contributing in different ways.

My husband has been very supportive. We've actually been together for about 15, 16 years, so he's learnt to cook now. Yeah, he's very supportive, and my children are actually 10 and six. So, they're a little bit older now, so they understand that mummy's doing school as well. So yeah, we all support each other.

I am blessed in that I have a husband that works – he works full-time, and he – so he supports us financially, and he is very supportive, encouraging of me to do this. ... We also live literally next door to my aunty and uncle, and they are always available to watch the boys if I need. So, I do have a very close-knit community of family that support me.

Academic support, mainly from workmates

Some students managed to find academic support from outside the university. This mainly came from workmates. Presumably, most partners or family members were not qualified to offer academic support. Workmates, though, could have sufficient expertise. Such help was particularly relevant when students were studying a subject related to their employment.

I have a colleague at work who is enrolled in the same bachelor degree. We are trying as much as possible to enrol on the same units. That way, we can help one another with the things that are not clear to us. We remind each other about what do we have to do. Basically, working together all the

way through the semester. Which is a great strategy to use, very useful. At least it helped me personally.

A multifaceted external support environment

We interpreted the case studies as showing that the diverse body of students in a university near the contemporary end of the spectrum, face a multiple array of challenges. There was one case of student who turned this on its head by relying on a multiple array of external support.

In my office, they're all maths teachers in there, so I know I have some people around me that can help me if I need any help, which will be good. He [husband] really pushed me into being able to start studying again, and my family, my mum and stepdad and my in-laws, they're all in Hobart as well, so they're supportive. ... She [mother] was a bit of an inspiration to get back into study and do it, and she's really supportive, so I can show – I get her to read my assignments and things like that. She's a good writer as well, so I've got her support. ... I work with HPE teachers a lot, and they've always said, "If you need any help, sing out", and I've got friends that work in schools and my sister-in-law works in a school, and I've got lots of support. ... I've found it a very positive experience, and like I said, because I've got lots of support.

Re-envisaging support for the student experience of learning

One of the key themes that has emerged from this project is that if universities are to make major shifts from the traditional to contemporary models of learning and teaching with a much more diverse student population, then there is a need to re-envisage support. Universities close to the contemporary end of the spectrum have redesigned their learning and teaching models to take advantage of the affordances of new combinations of pedagogy, technology, credential design and partners in delivering degrees. Modes of teaching and learning have consequently become more flexible to meet the needs of students from all walks of life, in a large variety of learning situations across campus, home and work contexts. The evidence from the student interviews reported in this, and other chapters, suggests that the design of student support has not seen a corresponding shift to meet the new ways of learning and teaching. This conclusion is consistent with an observation of the Australian Productivity Commission report (2019, p. 2).

The growing risk of students dropping out of university requires attention. On average, the additional students need greater academic support to succeed. While universities had strong incentives to expand student numbers, the incentives for remedial support are weak.

A key component of the contemporary model of higher education is the availability of online learning, which has enabled students to study off-campus, at home, work and other places. It is the provision of online learning which has made possible the delivery of educational opportunities to a more diverse of the student body. With the Australian Government's re-commitment to diversity in the latest performance-based funding schemes (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019), the door has been kept open for those who could not commit to spending time on-campus because of employment or carer responsibilities. This is true for both regional and remote students who study online without having to relocate for on-campus learning, as well as other categories of students who require and/or prefer the flexibility of time and place offered by online study.

The online learning environment and its relationship to levels of support

A key observation from an analysis of the interview transcripts in this study was the student perception that the 'university' provided support, no matter in what form or for what purpose. This perception pre-supposes an integrated provision of services for pastoral and learning support, which is in some tension with the normal approach to service provision across comprehensive universities.

Australian universities often allocate different types of support for the student experience across different cost and organisational in the university. While managerially efficient, this separation can cause a perception of fragmentation from the perspective of students.

For support to be effective, it needs to be perceived as an integral part of the learning environment, whether it be a blended environment, or a fully online environment such as the research site of this chapter. In this study, students did not perceive that the central support systems were delivering the types of services the students were seeking. Even at the school level, the two schemes investigated also seemed to struggle to have an impact if we take the students' evaluation as a legitimate assessment of their outcome.

From the students' perspective, key components of the online environment that provided effective and necessary support were the teacher-student, student-student interaction, and external support. There were generally positive reports about how teachers helped students to deal with pastoral and learning issues. Student-student interaction, while involving some unhelpful behaviours like lurking, still provided valuable support to the students' experience. External support from family and workmates played a key role in the immediate context the students found themselves in while studying online. A small number reported they were able to receive academic support from family or workmates. A relatively larger number of students reported lifestyle support from their families, which enabled them to study. The case studies make it clear that a supportive and accepting family was an integral part of a successful experience of studying in the online environment.

The growing role of online and blended learning in Australian models of learning and teaching

This chapter has reported on the student experience of support for their online studies in one of the participating universities in this research program. Broadly summarising, the self-reports from the participants have some similarities with the findings in Chapter 11. Students were seeking pastoral and learning support for their studies. They tended to receive it from teacher-student and student-student interaction (although some online behavior by students in the latter meant that it did not always occur effectively). Notably, centrally-provided support did not tend to reach students in ways that met their needs.

There is an economies of scale argument for centrally provided services. It simply is not cost effective to administer and provide all types of support, particularly pastoral services such as financial advice, counselling and other specialist advice to students, at the level of each program. However, it is clear that these services need to be designed in such a way to enable them to be integrated into the very fabric of the institutional design, its strategy, governance, funding, and other elements if they are to have an impact on all students.

The next chapter looks at the combined outcomes from chapters 11 and 12 and what they suggest for a model of integrated support for the university student experience of learning.