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An Academic's Role? Supporting Student Wellbeing in Pre-university Enabling Programs

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Abstract

Student wellbeing and mental health are increasingly a concern of universities. Most universities provide central counselling services and, in recent years, some have introduced wellbeing programs. However, an unrecognised source of support and pastoral care for students is academic staff. This pilot research project explored the experiences of academic staff in one university's enabling programs in terms of the type of support academic staff provide (academic and/or non-academic), how equipped they perceive they are to support their students, and how this role impacts on them. The study is qualitative; interviews were conducted and a thematic analysis undertaken. It was found that academic staff viewed supporting their students as part of their role, particularly due to the diverse and complex nature of the cohort, and noted that students sought support from them for academic and non-academic issues because they had a rapport with them, trust and regular contact. A positive finding was that the academic staff had clear boundaries and lines of referral, which means they were not taking on pseudo-counselling roles. How equipped staff perceived they were and how the support role impacted on them varied depending on their teaching role. The findings in this exploratory study prompt a re-conceptualisation of the academic role. The article proposes a model of support that is holistic, student and course centred, and that integrates the centrally-located university counsellors. Furthermore, it posits that at the core of the enabling programs is a philosophy of care.

Introduction

In recent decades, numerous studies have drawn attention to the high rates of mental health difficulties amongst university students compared to the general population (Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm 2012; Larcombe et al. 2016; Stallman 2010). Universities are increasingly concerned about student mental health and wellbeing; especially so when the connection is made between mental ill health, poor engagement and the resultant negative implications for retention, attrition and academic performance (Li & Carroll 2017; Orygen 2017; Stallman 2010). University enabling programs are open-access tertiary preparation courses; they tend to comprise students from multiple equity groups and diverse backgrounds with regard to age, cultural background and prior educational experiences (Crawford 2014; Lisciandro & Gibbs 2016). Mental health difficulties are among the challenges this cohort faces (Crawford et al. 2016; Lisciandro, Jones & Strehlow 2016). Generally, student support is provided by centrally located university support services, although some universities integrate such services into each faculty. Regardless of the model or the quality of these specific support services, they are just one avenue of support. An often unacknowledged source of support for students comes from academic staff: the students' lecturers and tutors. This study focuses on the role of academic staff in supporting their students. Academic staff in one university's Pre-degree Programs unit were interviewed to explore the type and extent of support they provided to their students, how equipped they perceived they were and the impact of this role. While numerous studies assess student mental health and wellbeing, there is a gap in the literature from the perspective of academic staff in regard to being providers of support. While the areas of emotional labour, stress and burnout have been investigated in educational settings, such as in K-12 schooling (Chang 2009; Vercambre et al. 2009), the impact of such work on academic educators in enabling programs has only recently begun to be explored (Crawford et al. 2018). The multiple findings from this research project prompt a reconceptualisation of the academic role; suggest benefits of a student-centred, course-centred, embedded support model; and posit that the academic educators in this study imbue an ethic and philosophy of care.

This article will present a review of the relevant literature in terms of student support, and present the frameworks and approaches that have developed internationally and in Australia in recent decades. At the outset, though, it is worth providing a brief overview of university student mental health.[1]

Context: university student mental health

[T]he mental health of tertiary students is an issue of pervasive and growing concern (CSHE 2011).

[T]he mental well-being of tertiary students is a serious public health issue (Larcombe et al. 2016, p.1084).

Compared with the general population, overall student health is poor and their emotional health a greater problem than their physical health (Storrie, Ahern & Tuckett 2010, p.4).

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[1] This paper applies the definitions of mental health and wellbeing as described in *Defining mental health and wellbeing* in the OLT *Enhancing Student Wellbeing* (2016) project and the *Student mental wellbeing in higher education: good practice guide* (Universities UK 2015, p.8).

Numerous research projects illustrate the prevalence of mental ill health among university students, especially compared to the non-student population, and the detrimental impact that studying at university can have on students' mental health (Bewick et al. 2010; Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm 2012; Leahy et al. 2010; Stallman 2010). For example, in a recent study of depression, anxiety and stress involving more than 5,000 students across six faculties in an Australian university, 26% of the student participants reported "severe" or "extremely severe" on at least one of the scales measuring depression, anxiety and stress, which is higher than the general population (Larcombe et al. 2016). Stallman's (2010) research shows that university students have a heightened level of distress (83.9%) compared to the general population (29%). Storrie, Ahern and Tuckett (2010) have found that mental health difficulties, such as stress, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, have been increasing among university students since the 1990s. Such findings suggest that university is a time of heightened distress and that university students are an "at-risk" population for mental health difficulties (Stallman 2010). As Slavin (2016) reports on student wellbeing in a medical school in the US, the students finished their university medical education with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression than they showed upon arriving; this highlights that university student mental health is indeed an environmental and cultural issue. Studies such as the Open Minds project at the University of Brighton show that student wellbeing is affected by factors related to students' academic work (60% in the Open Minds study), as well as challenges in their personal lives, such as work-life balance and financial issues (Morris 2010, p. 25).

Background and literature: approaches to student support in universities

Centrally located services

Generally, universities provide non-academic support for students in the form of centrally located support services, such as specialist counselling units. While these services are invaluable, students in need are often unwilling to access such assistance (Morris 2010). For example, in a study at a US university, Rosenthal and Wilson (2008, p. 64) found that "of students who reported clinically significant levels of psychological dis-stress (that is, they were in need of mental health services), more than three-fourths reported not receiving counseling for emotional problems during the past 6 months". When mental health services are centrally located, they are often isolated or removed from students' courses, and on smaller, regional campuses they either are limited or do not exist at all. Even when such services do exist, it is increasingly the case that counselling staff are dealing with complex cases and higher numbers, which results in increased waiting times (Browne, Munro & Cass 2017).

A focus on student experience, FYHE and transition

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, the work of Sally Kift, Karen Nelson and colleagues on their "third generation transition pedagogy" has encouraged and aspires to the implementation of 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, Nelson & Clarke 2010; Nelson et al. 2014).

The Healthy Universities "settings" approach

In the international context, a holistic, institution-wide "settings" approach to student health and learning underpins key frameworks and emerging initiatives. The statement "Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love", in the 1986 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization 2017), is at the heart of "settings" approaches to health and wellbeing. In the context of universities, it is core to the UK Healthy Universities Network (Healthy Universities 2017), which was established in 2006, and to the subsequent 2015 "Okanagan Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges", which made an international call to higher-education institutions to "incorporate health promotion values and principles into their mission, vision and strategic plans" (p.5), and, more specifically, to "[a]dvance 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). As a blueprint and an external driver, the Okanagan Charter is currently being enacted in Canadian universities (Rahilly et al. 2017). Further afield, its principles guide the Tertiary Wellbeing Aotearoa New Zealand (TWANZ) Network, which supports initiatives that promote student and staff health and wellbeing in tertiary institutions across New Zealand (TWANZ n.d.).

A "settings" approach to health and wellbeing in a university context encourages an institution-wide, holistic approach. According to the UK Healthy Universities (2017) Network, "[a] Healthy University aspires to create a learning environment and organisational culture that enhances the health, wellbeing and sustainability of its community and enables people to achieve their full potential". The mutually beneficial connection between learning and health is key to this approach (Mulder & Munro 2015, p.41). In Australia, the Southern Cross University implemented the Healthy Universities approach in 2015, with a specific focus on mental health (p.42). Momentum for high-level acknowledgement of health and wellbeing in university settings appears to be gaining in Australia, as shown by the formation of the Australian Health Promoting Universities Network in March 2016 (University of Sydney 2016) and the convening of the Inaugural Australasian Mental Health and Higher Education conference in June/July 2017 at James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland (James Cook University 2017).

Mental health and wellbeing: a teaching and learning issue

In the Australian higher-education context, concern for students' psychological health and wellbeing has been led by academics in legal and medical education in response to striking levels of mental ill health among law and medical students. Academics such as Rachael Field have intentionally reshaped the law curriculum to promote student wellbeing (Duffy, Field & Shirley 2011; Field 2014; Field & Duffy 2012; Field, Duffy & Huggins 2013; Field & Kift 2010). Field and colleagues stress the importance of student engagement as a key to wellbeing. To this end, Duffy, Field and Shirley (2011) propose that law students' engagement can be achieved through several strategies: ensuring active learning in lectures; demonstrating concern for students and their learning; skilful management of student expectations and the learning environment; and self-help engagement strategies. Such strategies and interventions in the law curriculum are developed and implemented by curriculum developers and teaching staff. This approach is supported by research undertaken by Larcombe and Fethers (2013), in which student mental health and wellbeing are treated as a teaching and learning issue. Likewise, a recent Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) project focusing on the role of academic educators' views student mental health as a teaching and learning issue (Baik et al. 2017). In the British context, findings from the Open Minds project highlight that teaching and support strategies, along with the specifics of students' academic work (such as workload, deadlines, assessments and exams), have

an impact on students' mental health and wellbeing (Morris 2010, p.14). Research suggests, therefore, that supporting students' wellbeing is currently, or should be, part of academics' role, of providing the conditions in which students can engage and achieve to their full potential.

Enabling programs and provision of support

Enabling programs are an alternative pathway to undergraduate study for students who would otherwise be ineligible for general entry. Such programs are a strategy for widening participation and increasing social inclusion and equity at many universities across Australia. They are generally fee-free and open access, and aim to prepare students academically and familiarise them with the academic culture and conventions. The student cohorts tend to be diverse. Hodges et al. (2013, p.97) note, "It is a consequence of the variety of educational experience that students in enabling programs will manifest even greater diversity than is now experienced in undergraduate programs." Students in enabling programs come from equity groups, non-traditional backgrounds and under-represented groups including low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds; mature-aged; regional and remote areas; refugee backgrounds; and first-in-family (Crawford 2014). It is often the case that students have not completed year 11 or 12 or have had interrupted high schooling and, as a result, have not had the opportunity to fulfil their academic potential (Lisciandro & Gibbs 2016). Many arrive in the programs with health (including mental health) difficulties and personal challenges (Crawford et al. 2016).

It is usually the case that students in enabling programs have access to centrally located university support services, such as counselling services, as do their undergraduate counterparts (Crawford et al. 2016). As invaluable as this support is, students in enabling programs do not always access it; Hodges et al. (2013) reported that students who dropped out of enabling programs made little or no use of the available support services. In addition, they point out that the nature of the student cohort in enabling programs provides universities with greater obstacles and, thus, they argue for more-targeted support (Hodges et al. 2013). Therefore, Hodges et al. (2013, p.100) recommend embedding pastoral care in the enabling programs to assist with retention; "The purpose is to have easy access to support always close at hand." They note two exemplars: first, the embedding of student support services (language and learning support, and counselling services) in the University of Newcastle's suite of enabling programs, and, second, "a high level of embedded support" in the University of Tasmania's (UTAS) enabling program, which includes Supported Studies units (p.110). The provision of support in enabling programs differs across Australia, ranging from being centrally located, reactive and ad hoc to proactive, embedded and holistic (Crawford et al. 2016).

The site: Pre-degree Programs at UTAS

This research was undertaken in the Pre-degree Programs area at UTAS, which encompasses two courses: an enabling program (the University Preparation Program) and an "enabling-like" program (a diploma-equivalent course). The courses are delivered on three campuses (Burnie, Hobart and Launceston) and online via the University's Learning Management System (LMS). Students can study part-time or full-time. The student cohort is diverse and complex. Students vary in age, cultural background and life and educational experiences. Many are first in their family to attend university and are from LSES areas; a significant minority are from refugee backgrounds (Crawford 2014). Many students face major challenges, such as mental health issues (Crawford et al. 2016).

In the Pre-degree Programs, teaching staff are classified as academics; their teaching roles include unit coordination[2], lecturing and tutoring, or a combination of all three, and they teach across both courses. On each campus, two academic staff with a leadership role (one for each of the two courses) are responsible for the pastoral care of students. For the purposes of this paper, staff in these positions will be referred to as "student coordinators". The student coordinators also coordinate units, lecture and tutor. They have an overview of students' progress in all of their units and provide guidance and advice, and they refer students on to the relevant staff in the centrally located student services unit with regard to both academic and non-academic matters. Most teaching staff have student consultation hours. Unique to Pre-degree Programs are the "Supported Studies" sessions: a weekly session in which all students are enrolled; they work individually or in small groups on their studies (usually assessment tasks) and ask for assistance from each other and their tutor. These classes develop a supportive learning atmosphere and community in which students are encouraged to ask questions and develop peer study and support groups. In general, support provided in Pre-degree Programs is student-learning-centred, organic, proactive (where possible) and responsive to students' needs (Crawford et al. 2016).

Methods

This research aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of academic educators in UTAS's Pre-degree Programs, specifically with regard to the type of support (academic and/or non-academic) they provide to their students, how equipped they perceive they are to perform this role and the impact of this support. Given the study's focus is on the participants' experiences, a qualitative method is appropriate (Creswell 2008). The data was collected from one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. In line with qualitative interview-collection procedures, the interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, allowing participants to reflect, explain details and elaborate on their experiences (Creswell 2014). Interviews let researchers access what is otherwise inaccessible: the subjective experiences and attitudes of the participants (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori 2011).

Following human research ethics approval in 2015, all academic staff in the UTAS Pre-degree Programs unit were invited to participate. Of the 34 academic staff at the time, comprising a mix of full-time ongoing, fractional contract and casual positions, 13 staff replied to the invitation. The 13 participants, drawn from the three campuses, were a combination of student coordinators, unit coordinators, lecturers and tutors, thus representing the full range of academic staff roles. There were five males and eight females. The participants attended an interview at their local campus with one of the two researchers in June 2015.

The interviews were recorded (with the participants' permission), transcribed, coded using NVivo software and analysed thematically. The two researchers manually coded the interviews that they conducted. In the initial stages of coding, the researchers created a codebook of themes, definitions and examples. The codebook went through several iterations until the researchers had reached agreement on the themes and sub-themes. The researchers cross-checked their coding to ensure inter-coder reliability (Creswell 2014).

Given that one of the researchers works in the same program as the participants, steps were taken to address any potential power dynamics between the interviewers and interviewees. As per the ethics application, to counter any potentially perceived pressure to participate in the study, the

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[2] At UTAS, a "unit" refers to a subject studied in one semester. Full-time students study three or four units per semester. Part-time students study one or two units per semester. Multiple units make up a "course".

invitation to participate was sent by a third person, the Pre-degree Programs administrative officer. Another solution to this potential issue was for the second researcher to conduct the interviews with staff with whom the first interviewer worked closely.

The combination of a researcher from within the program (emic) and a researcher from outside the program (etic) proved to be advantageous. In addition to eliminating the potential issue of power dynamics, having the emic and etic perspectives provided more understanding of the local contexts and requirements of the different teaching roles (that is, an insider's knowledge from the emic researcher), as well as an outsider's perspective free of presuppositions (from the etic researcher).

Findings

Eight major themes to arise from the data analysis were divided into two related areas: pastoral care/support role and academic educators' experiences (see Figure 1).
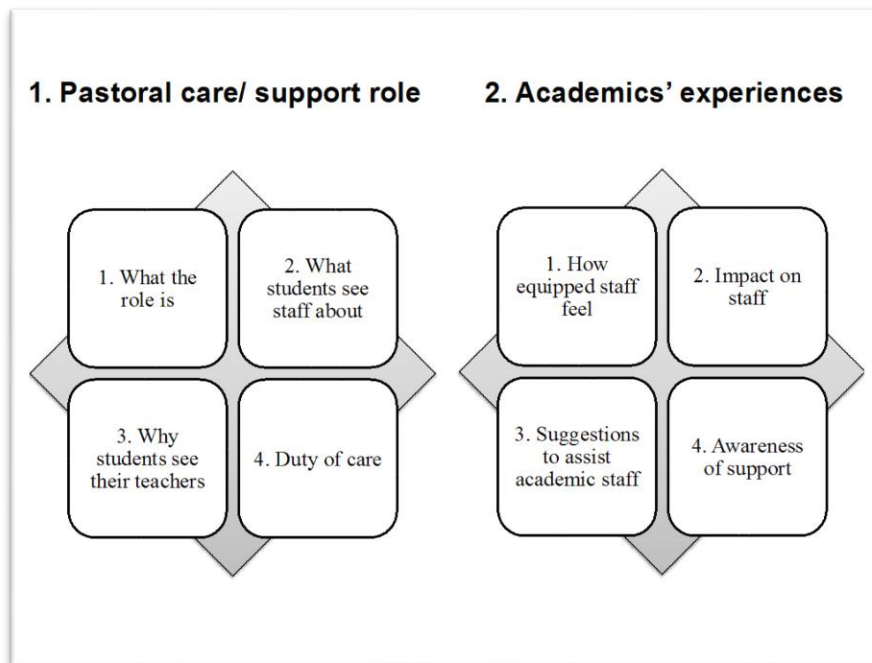

Figure 1: Data analysis themes

For the purposes of this article, six of the themes will be described[3] .Pseudonyms will be used when quoting or paraphrasing from the interviews.

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[3] Due to space constraints, the fourth theme in the two areas will be explored at a later date.

Pastoral care/support role

What the support role is

Regardless of the academic educators' roles and positions (that is, whether the interviewee was a student coordinator, unit coordinator, lecturer or tutor; full-time or part-time), all interviewees viewed "support" as being part of their work. Whether they thought it was "official" or "incidental" varied, depending on their specific position. Staff with student coordinator roles, for example, viewed support as a key component and as "official"; whereas some part-time, contract staff viewed it as "incidental". For instance, as Julie (a part-time contract tutor, lecturer and unit coordinator) stated: "Basically I don't have a pastoral care, official role, but just an incidental role." Similarly, Ross (a casual tutor, lecturer and unit coordinator) explained: "It's not really a formal role as such, but you end up with having to accommodate the chaos of their lives." Most of the interviewees were clear that their primary role was about teaching and learning; however, due to the nature of the cohort, part of their role included "supporting" their students.

What "supporting students" actually meant to the interviewees varied, depending on their position. For example, for Matt (a casual tutor), "supporting his students" meant noticing that someone looked upset or was acting out of character and checking to see if they were okay. If they were not, he would recommend that they see the relevant student coordinator. Several interviewees stressed the importance of listening. For example, Julie explained, "So my job is to listen to them and understand what they're saying, and then try to deal with it in whatever way it needs to be dealt with." Helen, a student coordinator, expressed the importance of talking: "Simply talking it through sometimes, with the people themselves is that…that's all they need half the time, is a sounding board." For Warren, who had a student coordinator role, providing emotional support was important:

> *I see my support, often in emotional terms, you know, some people will come…they'll have personal issues, they'll have difficulties at home, or in relationships because, you know, once they start studying, things happen at home, their partners change, maybe their attitudes change. And, so often it's emotional support, you know, but again, it may be reassuring them, it's okay to be studying, it's okay to go through those changes, and transitions, in terms of, you know, how you feel about yourself and how you feel about study, and maybe your ambitions.*

For staff in the student coordinator positions, support included providing advice and a coordinated response for "at-risk" students, as well as providing support and intervening proactively with students who had disclosed non-academic issues (such as anxiety and depression) that would affect their studies. This approach was to be expected, as it is an explicit part of their position. The support from this group of staff was described as "personalised, holistic and ongoing".

A noticeable theme in the responses was the importance of the nature of the cohort. It was stressed that the cohort is complex and diverse and, therefore, required the support of academic staff, as illustrated in the following quotation from Vanessa (a student coordinator):

> *I think that with Pre-degree Programs, obviously for a diverse range of students, but the majority are from at-risk backgrounds, and there's reasons why they are at-risk, and there are reasons why they haven't succeeded previously in formal education. And so part of our job is to help them move beyond those to the point where they can take some*

control over those situations and continue to study effectively. So I think it is, it's an integral part of what we do.

Most of the interviewees had previous experience in undergraduate teaching and noticed there was greater need to provide support in the Pre-degree Programs courses than in undergraduate studies. For example, according to Shana (a student coordinator):

Certainly the cohort of students in pre-degrees is much more complex, with many more issues, than I saw in my previous area. So, yeah, much, much higher-needs students and many more of them, even though it's a smaller area.

In explaining what they perceived their role to be, the interviewees assertively stated what it was not: that they were *not* counsellors, as illustrated by Nicholas (a casual tutor): "Look, I would generally try and avoid getting into the nitty-gritty, because I don't...I'm not qualified to provide...I'm very careful not to act in the role as counsellor." Similarly, Michelle (a part-time contract tutor, lecturer and unit coordinator) said: "You've got to be very careful. Even though I've done a lot of in-servicing, I'm not a trained counsellor." The decisiveness around what their role is and is not was a feature of each interview, suggesting that the interviewees knew their boundaries and limits. Once a student's issue reached a point that was beyond their scope, they knew to refer on to the relevant student coordinator, who, if need be, referred the student on to counselling staff.

What students seek support for from academic staff

The interviewees listed a range of issues about which their students contacted them; these were both academic and non-academic, as illustrated in the following quotation from Shana (a student coordinator):

Marriage breakdowns, people with anxiety, so, people who have had ongoing anxiety, people who have depression, people who...I'll call "aimlessness", maybe a little bit too much, but they're not quite sure why they're here, what they're doing, so, lack of motivation in terms of their studies – and talking to them about their strategies and what they want to do, and all of that sort of thing. Oh, look, it's broad and you're never quite sure what's going to happen.

Often, the students would see academic staff about a challenge or difficulty they were having with their studies (for example, an assessment task or not getting their work in on time), and it would emerge that there was a non-academic reason underpinning the study issue they were experiencing, as illustrated by Warren (a student coordinator):

They'll come in with a practical problem, like they want me to read, maybe some, you know, a passage, with an essay for instance, [that] they've written. But often there's other reasons they've come. So, more personal ones. And I'll give you an indication of that. I've had a woman who's now in her degree, she spent a year, I taught her for a year.... And she persistently came to see me about her writing, and yet her writing was good. But very quickly I discovered, there was a whole undercurrent, and the undercurrent was anxiety, she had quite severe anxiety, which she didn't necessarily display, or it wasn't obvious. And so, we ended up spending a lot more time on her anxiety than we did [on] the work.

The opposite was also the case: staff often found that their students were up front about their non-academic issues (the list included depression, anxiety, social phobia, suicidal ideation, self-harm, family breakdowns, family violence, family illness, siblings with autism, financial issues and homelessness) because the difficulties were impacting on their studies. As Vanessa (a student coordinator) summed up: "I don't think the issues that our students have are divorced from the[ir] study. I think the two are interlinked." The following from Neela (a part-time contract tutor and lecturer) likewise illustrates the link between academic and non-academic challenges:

> *Yeah, yeah, but I don't usually get students kind of, coming to see me to lay out their life history and problems independently of that, so it's always kind of like, "I can't do this assignment because…". And then there's reasons…so, students do, sometimes, talk to me about their non-academic challenges, usually in the context of not being able to get work done.*

Students' non-academic challenges impact their academic tasks and goals, and vice versa. It is therefore not possible for staff to compartmentalise and separate the two spheres, and to only address the academic issues in the context of providing support for students.

Why students seek support from academic staff

Interviewees listed multiple reasons why their students sought support from them. They can be divided into the sub-themes listed in Table 1.

	Table 1: Why students seek support from academic staff in their course
1	Their issues impact on their study.
2	Students feel their teachers are approachable have a rapport with them, trust them, know them, see them often, understand their studies and can offer some solutions or strategies.
3	Students know that it is the particular role of some staff within the course to advise students (e.g. tutor X is the first port of call for Unit A; student coordinator Y is the first port of call for issues regarding the course as a whole).
4	Some students do not have support from family or friends; in fact, some family members are even explicitly unsupportive and dismissive of their university studies and ambitions.
5	The campus is by nature small, friendly and welcoming.
6	The content of the unit of study raises discussion around topics such as stress management, motivation and procrastination.
7	Some students do not want to see a counsellor because it has not worked in the past or they perceive that counsellors do not understand their studies; seeing a counsellor is a huge step for some students to take.

It is unsurprising that students seek support from their lecturers and tutors. This point is also supported by literature; for example, in a university-wide study in the UK, Morris found that "students identified that they tend to seek support from those they are already close to rather than specialist services, and that apart from family and friends, in university this tends to be members of academic staff, whether personal tutors or lecturers" (Morris 2010, p.16).

Academic educators' experiences

How equipped staff perceive they are to support students

To provide some context, this section will commence with three quotations that represent the interviewees' experiences.

> *Yeah, I know there have been days where I seem to have...there seems to be periods in the semester, for no known reason...where I'm seeing four students in a row all with just awful things going on in their lives, truly awful things. And it's...you just sometimes need to be able to take a step back and breathe out of it, but sometimes you don't have that ability because five minutes later you have to walk into a classroom and give a lecture.*
> (Vanessa, student coordinator)
>
> *A grandmother…so she was a distance student. And not particularly literate or numerate, and not particularly clear in her thinking, that was continually going backwards and forwards over issues, and continually sending emails, and asking for clarification, and asking for support, and how was she going, and there was a lot of to and froing. She was a particularly demanding student, took up a lot of time.*
> (Ross, casual tutor, lecturer and unit coordinator)
>
> *We've had people who've been abused physically, as well as emotionally. People who have suicidal tendencies, who've had thoughts of suicide. People who have had partnerships that have given them ultimatums, where they've said, you make a choice between university or me. We've also had people that are not only self-harming, but, just, where I felt that it was more than what we should be handling in that regard.*
> (Helen, student coordinator)

These quotations highlight that academic staff teach students who have multiple and diverse challenges. In regard to how equipped staff feel they are to support their students, responses ranged from feeling equipped to not feeling equipped, as well as feeling a "bit of both". For example, on the one hand, several interviewees expressed confidence, due to life experience, training and learning on the job. On the other hand, several part-time contract staff stated they did not feel equipped. For example, Neela said:

> *I don't feel very well equipped, personally, but I feel like I have a good kind of support network to help out with that…yeah, I feel like I don't…I definitely don't have the skills to counsel someone. I'd be mortified if I said the wrong thing to someone at the wrong time.*

This group tended to say, "I don't feel equipped, but…". What followed the word "but" revealed that they knew their limits and knew to refer their students on when the issues were beyond their expertise. Given that counselling was not their role, saying they "don't feel equipped" was not as problematic as it may appear at first glance, as encapsulated by Pamela (a casual tutor):

> *Well, actually I feel relatively inept…. In terms of pastoral care, in terms of personal issues, I don't think my position is the right one to handle those things. Well, I feel my position…and I think I'm well equipped to be able to support and refer on. I see that as my role and no deeper than that. But I'm okay, quite comfortable with that.*

All staff with the student coordinator roles felt "a bit of both". They mostly felt equipped, but occasionally a student appeared in their office with an issue that they felt "thrown by", such as homelessness or domestic violence, as exemplified by Helen:

> *As academics, we're not always well equipped for, I must admit, and from my perspective, sometimes I still can be a little shocked, or amazed at some of the things that they actually come…or some of the elements they discuss with us, of their life…. I feel less equipped, as I said before, in dealing with some of the social problems, particularly the level of the problems themselves. I mean, the one that really floored me, besides the homeless one, because I felt that that was a personal wake-up call for me, because I thought in our affluent society, to have a student who's homeless, and yet here, trying to make something of themselves, is hard.*

While the part-time contract and casual staff expressed feeling inept and ill-equipped, it is reassuring that they reported not taking on roles beyond their expertise, and that they did not feel obliged to do so, as they had colleagues to whom they could refer their students. It needs to be considered, though, what the situation would be if these academic educators did not have colleagues in their teams (i.e. the student coordinators, in this particular study) to whom to refer their students. Also, of potential concern is the level of responsibility and complex issues encountered by the student coordinators, as they are academic staff and not trained counsellors or psychologists.

The impact on academic staff

The majority of interviewees reported that supporting their students did have an impact on them. Greater negative impact tended to be felt by staff in student coordinator positions. This situation is not unexpected, as they have the greatest responsibility to support students, to understand the bigger picture of how students in their course and on their particular campus are progressing in their studies, and to advise, follow up with and refer them to other relevant support services, such as university counselling services.

The negative impacts mentioned include: tiredness, sleeping problems and feeling worried, concerned, distressed, upset and unsettled. Student coordinators mentioned feeling "anti-social outside of work" and a "weight of responsibility on their shoulders". Staff expressed that they manage the negative impacts primarily by talking, especially to colleagues within Pre-degree Programs, friends and partners, and through exercise and humour.

Staff also noted the positive impact they experience, as illustrated in the following quotation from Warren:

> *I just think we're in a privileged position. We get people at a transit point in their lives, where, for a start they may realise ambitions that have been hidden for, perhaps 30*

years, 40 years, you know, they've held onto things and now they've realised that perhaps, at this transition point they may realise those things.

These findings highlight the contrasts in enabling educators' experiences that cover the full range of emotions from being immensely rewarding to being exhausting and upsetting. The impacts on staff described here are supported by a recent exploratory study of academic educators in enabling programs in which staff reflected on the "emotional roller coaster" of their work; the challenges were described in terms of "emotional labour demands", and the privileges and benefits, such as witnessing students' transformations, are proposed as "protective factors" that mitigate stress (Crawford et al. 2018).

Suggestions to assist academic staff

When asked about suggestions for improvement and/or what might assist academic educators in their support role, four main themes arose, as listed in Table 2.

	Table 2: suggestions for improvement to assist academic staff
1	Training, professional development and refresher courses
2	More time to talk
3	Communication between academic staff and counsellors (some participants expressed a concern that some advice students received from counsellors was not always in the students' best "educational" interest)
4	More built-in support, given the cohort

A theme also arose about the attributes required of academic educators in enabling programs. The interviewees stressed the need for "the right type" of staff; it was mentioned that Pre-degree Programs staff are "different", and it was felt that these educators have a different approach and philosophy to their peers in undergraduate courses. Having an understanding of the enabling cohort and the range of the students' issues was deemed to be paramount. Having specific positions within Pre-degree Programs (the student coordinator positions were specified here) for academic staff (i.e. the unit coordinators, lecturers and tutors) to whom to refer their students was considered to be crucial. Some participants also suggested that different expectations are required for academic staff in Pre-degree Programs to those in undergraduate courses, due to the complex cohort and high levels of support required.

Discussion

This research project set out to explore the nature and extent of academic and non-academic support that academic staff provided to students in an enabling program and an "enabling-like" program, and how this aspect of their work affected them. From the multiple themes that arose, as articulated in the findings, two overarching messages arose repeatedly. First, support for students (academic and non-academic) *is* part of the academic role in Pre-degree Programs, and this is necessary due to the complexity and diversity of the cohort. Second, the academic staff

interviewed did, overall, have clear boundaries. They did not perceive themselves as counsellors. They knew their limits; they knew to whom in the programs to refer their students when necessary. These findings and overarching messages prompt three related foci for discussion: 1. supporting the "whole student" by reconceptualising the academic role; 2. a student-centred, course-centred, embedded support model; and 3. the importance of understanding the enabling student cohort and the resultant philosophy of care.

Supporting the "whole student" by reconceptualising the academic role

This qualitative study has demonstrated that academic staff in one university's pre-degree courses provide both academic and non-academic support for their students. This support is perceived as holistic; it is not considered possible to separate the academic and non-academic, as outlined by Michelle (a part-time, contract academic educator): "If you're going to support students, it's not only an academic support, because in order to get them to do the best they can, you're supporting the whole person."

The necessity of viewing the student as a whole person is supported by the work of feminist scholar bell hooks (1994), specifically in her book in *Teaching to Transgress*. Similarly, Foster and Bloemhard (2003) state that "the academic and the personal cannot be separated' and 'pastoral care cannot be a separate program". The necessity of supporting "the whole student" is also acknowledged in literature on the doctoral supervisor-student relationship, which often involves an emotional (non-academic) dimension (Strandler et al. 2014).

This holistic approach has its opponents and can be problematic, as academic roles formally consist of the triumvirate of research, teaching and service. Support and pastoral care are often seen by individuals and/or their managers as "not an academic's job" and as being "poor use of their time", as Duffy, Field and Shirley (2011, p.252) note in regard to university law schools:

> With the achievement of high quality research outputs taking priority in many Australian law schools due to external measures of academic achievement and success, the suggestion that extra time and effort might be spent on an explicit pastoral role for academics is likely to be met with some resistance.

However, they go on to argue the benefits of undertaking the care and support role:

> Demonstrating care and concern for students and their learning has the potential to promote student engagement, and thereby support the psychological wellbeing of students. At the very least, it is a worthwhile time investment when the stakes (student mental health) are so high.

Although Duffy, Field and Shirley (2011) are referring to law students, this approach and attitude is applicable beyond legal education. In addition, highly regarded strategies in regard to transition and student engagement in higher education in Australia, such as Kift, Nelson and colleagues' (Kift & Field 2009; Nelson et al. 2014) "third generation transition pedagogy", advocate a holistic approach, as do international frameworks and initiatives, such as the UK Healthy Universities Network (2017), which recognises a key link between health and learning, as does the Okanagan Charter (2015). Furthermore, at the core of the Australian Government OLT project *Enhancing Student Wellbeing* is the premise that students' wellbeing *is* a teaching and learning issue (Baik et al. 2017; Larcombe, Baik & Brooker 2015).

In these holistic (and teaching- and learning-centred) approaches, academic staff are being explicitly called upon to pay attention to their students' non-academic issues, such as mental health, because such challenges impact on students' academic engagement and performance. It follows, therefore, that the academic role needs to be reconceptualised to incorporate the "support" dimension, thereby making explicit, and acknowledging and valuing the role and benefits of supporting "the whole student".

Also, academic staff are being called upon to consider how the curriculum, their teaching and learning practice and the teaching and learning environment they create impact on their students – in either fostering or hindering student wellbeing (and thus academic performance). Academic staff can, for example, be proactive (and preventative) in supporting student wellbeing in how they design the curriculum and embed content that promotes, for instance, mental health awareness, resilience and self-efficacy (Crawford et al. 2016; Lisciandro, Jones & Strehlow 2016; Slavin, Schindler & Chibnall 2014).

A valid concern of academics and managers in practicing "support of the whole student" as part of the academic role is that academic staff, not being trained psychologists or counsellors, could cross the line and take on a pseudo-counselling role. As unskilled pseudo-counsellors, they could be impacted on personally and professionally to their detriment and to the detriment of their students. Another scenario, however, was revealed in this study: the interviewees clearly articulated that they were *not* counsellors and that they had clear boundaries. They knew to whom in their courses they could refer their students. This finding illustrates the importance of having clear lines of referral and boundaries, in addition to understanding the expectations of their role. Without clear lines of referral the outcome for academic staff in this study could have been quite different.

A student-centred, course-centred, embedded support model

The positive findings that the academic staff in this study were aware of their boundaries and to whom they could refer students within the courses suggests that this particular model of holistic support works in this context. However, several staff members made comments about counsellors not understanding the students' academic context. These comments are not being interpreted in this paper as indicating that counsellors perform inadequately; a concomitant proposition is that academic staff and counselling staff would benefit from communication and the development of working relationships, trust and respect, so that they can learn from each other. This model has grown in an ad-hoc, organic manner on one of the campuses; it will be elaborated here.

What often occurs in universities, for many valid reasons, is that support services are located centrally (and outside faculties and schools). As a result, support is often isolated, and communication and relationships between counsellors and academic staff are not a priority or are difficult to maintain. This model is represented in Figure 2.
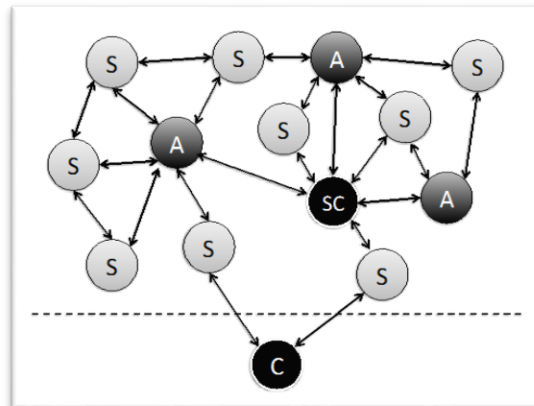
Figure 2: Ad hoc support model

Key:
S = Student
A = Academic educator (i.e. unit coordinator, lecturer or tutor)
C = Counsellor
SC = Student coordinator (also an academic educator)

In this scenario, personalised, holistic, integrated, whole-of-life cycle support is provided within the course, and support from student services, such as counselling, is external to the course. A model for integrating counsellors, which developed in an organic way on one of the campuses, is illustrated in Figure 3.
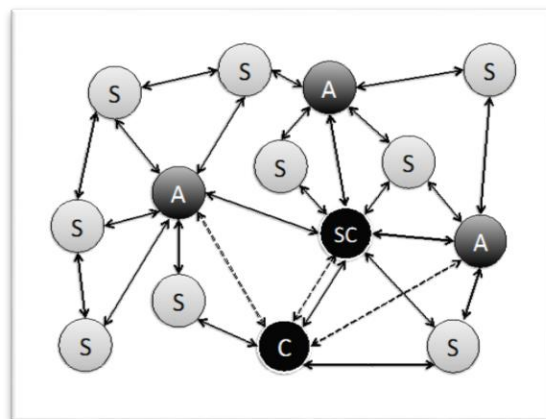

Figure 3: Holistic integrated support model

The dotted line indicates communication between academic staff and counsellors, such as in staff meetings (formal and informal) and in staff training. The two-way arrows on the dotted lines represent academic staff learning from counsellors and vice versa. For example, academic staff

learn from counsellors in regard to mental health conditions; as a result, they will be better equipped to support students in a proactive way. Counsellors learn from academic staff in regard to classroom management and teaching and learning practice; as a result, they will have a better understanding of the educational context. This will facilitate a more proactive approach to supporting students with mental health difficulties from both sides. Furthermore, it is expected that relationships will develop between academic staff and counsellors, as will mutual respect and shared understandings. It needs to be acknowledged that this model was developed by specific individuals in a specific situation; however, it has the potential to be implemented more broadly if incorporated as a higher-level priority.

This model, although only small-scale, is an exemplar of Kift, Nelson and Clarke's (2010) "third generation transition pedagogy", as it does not compartmentalise or isolate support. The student-centred, holistic model as articulated by Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010, p.11) aims for "a one-world view from the student-facing perspective and is implemented through the seamless involvement of professional and academic staff". The supports wrap around the students in their course.

The importance of understanding the enabling student cohort and the resultant philosophy of care

The sphere of enabling education is unique in regard to its student cohort and, as a result, in the type of support required and expectations of the lecturers and tutors, as noted by Nicholas (a casual tutor):

> *You know, certainly as far as the extra level of support that we are expected, and need, to provide to our students, because we want them to graduate successfully, and that's our goal, and then enter a degree. That's what we want, and in order to get them to there, you know, they're coming from a far lower level than most of our students that enter straight into an undergraduate degree. So I think it's important that the staff teaching the program have a really good understanding of that, and that's their expectation, that when they start teaching they're not expecting that they're just going to deliver a lecture or a tutorial and walk away and students have got to be completely autonomous and got to run themselves, because that's not how it operates at all.*

Several interviewees made the point that academics in Pre-degree Programs differ from their colleagues in standard undergraduate programs in their attitudes towards and expectations of their students, and are perhaps unusual in their holistic and empathetic approach. The fact they take on the support role suggests a particular ethic and an understanding of the cohort. In fact, as Archer, Cantwell and Bourke (1999, p.35) state, "enabling courses tend to be imbued with a social equity ethic". This is not to say that enabling educators are unique in this approach; there would certainly be academic staff in undergraduate courses with a similar ethic or teaching and learning philosophy. However, it was reiterated in the interviews that, given the nature of the cohort, a "particular type of staff member" is required in enabling programs.

Here, we propose that fundamental to this difference associated with academic educators in enabling programs is the time and attention paid to teaching, learning and support. At the core of these enabling educators' teaching philosophies and attitudes is care. Further research is required to explore and articulate enabling pedagogies and philosophies in relation to care.

Conclusion

This study found that academic staff in the area of Pre-degree Programs at one university viewed supporting the "whole student" as part of their academic role, particularly so due to the nature of the cohort, which is diverse and complex. Unsurprisingly, students sought assistance from their teachers for non-academic issues because they had developed trust and a rapport. It was found that in supporting their students, academic staff had clear boundaries and lines of referral due to the clear staff structure, which meant that they did not take on counselling roles, for which they acknowledged that they lacked skills and expertise. While it is pleasing that staff knew their limits in this particular research, it needs to be noted that it is only one study undertaken at one point in time. It is worth exploring the impact of the role on staff in other programs.

With student mental health increasingly an issue at universities in Australia and internationally, and with holistic, institution-wide approaches to health being encouraged by, for instance, the International Okanagan Charter's (2015) call for higher-education institutions to "incorporate health promotion values and principles into their mission, vision and strategic plans", it is timely and appropriate to propose a reconceptualisation of the academic role to incorporate and acknowledge care and support. In so doing, we are acknowledging health and wellbeing as a teaching and learning issue and everyone's business. Rather than compartmentalising support, a seamless experience from the students' perspective can be achieved by implementing a student-centred, course-centred, embedded support model, as articulated in this paper; such a model also fosters relationships between academic staff and counselling staff, with the added benefit of a two-way transference of knowledge and understanding.

While it may be difficult to argue that supporting and caring for "the whole student" is worth an academic's time, as Duffy, Field and Shirley (2011, p.252) express, the stakes (students' mental health) are too high not to do so. Furthermore, as uncovered in this paper, it is the reality of the participants – academic staff in enabling courses – that they practice care and support and take a holistic approach; it is their response to students' needs and arises from their understanding of the cohort, and from their philosophies and ethics. Not to follow this approach is to ignore the link between learning and health and to perpetuate a culture where, for example, being mentally unwell is compartmentalised or stigmatised. To acknowledge that learning cannot be separated from health opens up a different conversation; it enables a shift to considering the whole environment and culture of the institution, and to viewing health as an environmental and cultural issue. Suddenly, there are moral and ethical imperatives to developing a healthy university culture. While this holistic approach is encouraged for ethical and moral reasons to foster students' learning, health and academic success, it is worth reminding managers with financial pressures that such an approach also has longer-term economic benefits to institutions because it impacts on retention and attrition.

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