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Student Support, Beyond Empty Signifiers: Insights and Challenges from Enabling Educators. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

Student support is a key focus within the widening participation agenda, as effective support enhances retention and success. However, student support is not well defined in higher education, which is problematic as it is difficult to measure success if stakeholders have different definitions. Without clear boundaries in student support, educators who work with marginalised students are at risk of "over-supporting" students or possibly emulating a counselling role. This practice report utilises autoethnography to draw on the lived experience of seven educators working in Enabling programs across four universities. It explores how student support was defined and enacted in their programs and what factors or resources can facilitate or frustrate efforts to effectively support students. The findings highlight the complexity of supporting the multifaceted needs of marginalised students with more nuanced and tailored approaches. The educators in this study collectively emphasised the need for a consistent definition of student support, alongside clear workload allocation and additional training to effectively support students and increase retention and success.

***Keywords**:* Enabling education; student support; collaborative authoethnography; higher education.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, reviews of Australia's tertiary education sector have called for more and better support for students, especially those from equity groups. Most recently, the *Australian Universities Accord* (O'Kane et al., 2024), a government-commissioned review of higher education designed to drive national educational reform, makes numerous references to student support without providing detailed information on what effective student support looks like in practice or how it might be specifically defined and delimited. Unfortunately, a broad call for more student support has also developed alongside

increasing pressures for economic efficiency and funding cuts within the neoliberal university. The quality of embedded student support varies, influenced by available resources and the extent to which personalised teaching is prioritised. While frontline educators, particularly those working in Enabling programs (also known as access, foundation, bridging, or preparation programs), are often the first point of contact for students in need of support (Stokes, 2021), not all academics have the necessary training or skills to effectively meet this growing demand. Additionally, Enabling educators may experience role conflict as they navigate competing responsibilities and expectations. They must balance their dual roles as academics with their role as supportive enablers, committed to providing every student with the best possible chance of success despite significant obstacles and challenges. The pastoral care provided by Enabling educators is often unrecognised within the neoliberal university (Crawford et al., 2018). As a result, the actual practice of delivering student support has become increasingly complex and challenging for frontline educators, who are expected to do more for a growing number of students despite limited time and resources.

An unfortunate and unintended consequence of these tensions is that student support becomes an ambiguous concept, at best, interpreted differently depending on one's role and institutional culture; at worst, reduced to a meaningless and empty signifier. As a result, student support has become one of many catch-all phrases that may not be fully understood, effectively applied, or adequately funded. Moreover, much of the well-intended and widely publicised student support fails to reach or benefit the non-traditional and marginalised equity groups who need it the most (Picton & Kahu, 2022). This practice report aims to advance the discussion on developing a clear definition of student support, alongside practical approaches grounded in empirical research and the praxis of pathways educators in Australian Enabling programs. These educators are seen as experts in embedded models of holistic student support for students from under-represented backgrounds (Motta & Bennett, 2018). The practice report argues for the need for institutions to delineate a comprehensive definition of student support within the context of Enabling Education, providing Enabling educators with clarity on their roles to effectively assist students at their point of need.

Literature Review

A problematic aspect of the term, "student support", is its lack of a clear and consistent definition within higher education. The definition can extend from referring exclusively to academic support provided by educators through to a range of services that are ostensibly offered throughout the university. On university websites, for example, "support" is used as a descriptor for activities (e.g., study support, academic support) as well as for people (e.g., support staff). Sometimes the term student support is used to refer to a very specific aspect: for example, financial support or counselling services. What unites these various uses of the term is a tendency to position the student as deficit (having the problem and needing support), and the university is positioned as the provider of support services (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009).

Despite lack of clear definitions, the literature illuminates a significant link between student support services and student success. Student support is often characterised as something separate from the work of academics, creating a dichotomy between academic and professional staff. Bossu et al. (2019) argue that in the ever-changing nature of modern universities, the lines between support staff and academic roles are increasingly blurred. Adjacent to this is the argument presented by Kift (2015) and Shah et al., (2021) who argue for a whole-of-institution approach to supporting students. Similarly, Hoyt (2023) found that student affairs and academic support services can improve student retention through encouraging students to connect with a range of initiatives and programs, including extracurricular activities and peer mentoring. Central support services may be particularly beneficial for fostering student engagement by enhancing their belonging, self-efficacy, wellbeing, and emotional engagement (Picton & Kahu, 2022). The link between student support and success is well-established, as is the advantage of a whole-of-institution ethic which is particularly beneficial for students from equity groups.

Enabling Programs

In the Australian context, Enabling programs are one initiative designed to improve equity by preparing students for university study (James et al., 2024). Nationally and internationally, similar programs use terms including "pathways programs", "bridging programs", "direct entry programs", "sub-bachelor programs", "foundation programs", "access programs", or "developmental education" (Syme et al., 2021). Regardless of terminology, the focus on creating opportunities for students who face barriers to higher education remains a shared objective.

The high numbers of equity students in Enabling courses means that Enabling courses commonly embed, in curriculum and pedagogical practice, a focus on developing students' coping strategies to adapt to the challenges of higher education. Crawford and Johns (2018) found that much of the assumed pastoral activities and efforts of these educators, occurs outside the academic and classroom realm, due to the complex nature of student needs, including a prevalence of mental health issues. This support for students is integral to Enabling education. Non-academic challenges cannot be isolated from academic

challenges, because they impact students' success (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Stokes, 2021). Hence, Enabling educators view student support as an incidental (non-official), yet critical part of their roles.

Evidence has shown that providing non-academic support along with academic support requires Enabling educators to be more empathetic of our cohorts (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Stokes, 2021). Motta and Bennett (2018) detail this in their "pedagogies of care". Presenting their research from a feminist perspective they highlight the link between caring and equitable practice in Enabling education and argue that pedagogies of care are essential for knowledge to be co-created with marginalised groups, which aids the balancing of power relations, leading to greater equity.

Undoubtedly pedagogies of care are necessary within Enabling student cohorts, who are more likely to face psycho-socio-cultural barriers to accessing higher education. For example, a study by Nieuwoudt (2023) found that university students, especially those from marginalised groups, are more likely to be impacted by mental health issues than the general population. Unfortunately, the literature positions this pedagogy as feminised and marginalised in the neoliberal higher education system (Motta & Bennett, 2018), falling outside the role, and workload, of an academic. Appearing more willing to incorporate support into their everyday role can result Enabling educators being perceived as outside the mainstream academic structure and counterproductive to the need for neoliberal efficiencies (Balloo et al., 2023). While there is a variety of pedagogical approaches adopted by Enabling educators, there is consensus that care and support for students is central to their practice (Balloo et al., 2023; Priest & McDougall, 2021). Unfortunately, that leads to Enabling educators committing substantial emotional labour to their teaching, which might be seen as "pandering" or beyond the role (Motta & Bennett, 2018) and may lead to burn-out (Stokes, 2021).

Methodology

Autoethnography was chosen as the primary methodology for this research due to its valuable approach to collecting experiential reflections from educators within the field of Enabling programs (see Jones et al., 2023). This study employs collaborative autoethnography, as distinct from an individual autoethnography (Chang, 2021), allowing for a nuanced and deeply personal understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by educators in the context of Enabling programs as they enact student support.

This research aims to explore the multifaceted nature of student support within Enabling education by addressing three core questions. Firstly, it seeks to understand how Enabling practitioners define student support, delving into their conceptualisations of effective assistance for students. Secondly, the study considers the strategies, practices, and interventions they employ to assist students. Lastly, the research aims to identify the factors that either facilitate or frustrate impactful student support within Enabling education.

Participants

The seven practitioners in this study were educators in Enabling programs spanning four Australian regional universities. The study explores the lived experiences of these practitioners as they support their cohorts of equity students and examines their perspectives on student support. To maintain confidentiality, the reflections were de-identified and assigned a number. Each practitioner serves as an educator within the Enabling sector and represent various stages and lengths of academic careers across a variety of disciplines.

Data Analysis

The six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflective thematic analysis were employed iteratively to guide the dataset analysis through the stages of data familiarisation, systematic data coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. The research team familiarised themselves with the reflections. The initial coding stage compared a manual analysis and one using ChatGPT to assist with recognising similarities and organising codes. The team then reviewed and reorganised these codes to combine their coding alongside the digital analysis. Subsequently, they identified key themes and stepped back to discern a broader thematic picture. This process revealed three key domains: the issues students present with (complexities), the inhibitors and barriers to supporting students towards success (frustrations), and the nature of support that can overcome barriers and lead to success for students (facilitations).

Findings

Complexities

Practitioner reflections highlighted that students in Enabling education often have varied and complex backgrounds and hence, this is a central theme when it comes to defining the breadth and depth of support required. The five sub-themes align with much of the literature mentioned previously, and so we present a brief statement on each sub-theme that summarises our findings. Practitioner identifiers are stated in parentheses.

Academic and Learning Challenges

Equity students present with a range of academic challenges, reflecting their "diverse learning needs" [6], impacts on learning from being regional or remote, and negative prior learning experiences. It was found that implementation of support involves understanding the complex nature and source of the academic challenges.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Equity students present with significant complexities around social and emotional wellbeing needs. There is an "increasing prevalence of mental health issues among students" [1]. There are also complexities as "students share deeply personal experiences" [1]. Emotional complexities were found to manifest when students are struggling, and as academics we "feel a sense of responsibility to help them" [3].

Cultural and Socioeconomic Challenges

Against a wider national and international backdrop of growing socio-economic inequality, the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of students significantly impact their support needs. In terms of social standing, "they're a cross section of the 'real world'… devoid (often) of power, privilege and social and cultural capital." [6]. Students are time-poor, "many have families, young children, and caring responsibilities [and] nearly all students work" [5]. This requires a nuanced and equity-focused approach for support.

Imposter Syndrome and Self-Confidence

One significant finding is students' experiences of "imposter syndrome" as defined by Taylor et al. (2022) who adapted the psychological construct to higher education, as "*feeling as if* one isn't good enough and one doesn't belong *despite evidence to the contrary*" (p. 5). In this study, despite evidence of their accomplishments, "a good majority of our students come with low confidence, low self-efficacy, and doubt whether they can achieve a higher education degree" [7]. Supporting students requires "greater understanding and breaking down learning materials, assessment items and university systems" [6].

Desire for Personal and Academic Improvement

Students often express a strong desire for improvement across various facets of their academic and personal lives; however, they do not always understand good help-seeking behaviour, a matter further complicated by their attitude to failure. "If it happens that a student fails an assessment or a unit, it is incredibly important to support them through this and keep them moving forwards" [5]. Providing tailored support that addresses both aspirations, and defeatism is crucial for a comprehensive definition of student support.

Frustrations

From the thematic analysis, several barriers to providing support were evident and these clearly caused frustration for the practitioners. It is noted that these are quite separate from the complexities the students present, and hence, form the second theme for consideration when attempting to define what support looks like, and what must be considered to provide effective support for student success.

Institutional Barriers and Neoliberal Time Pressures

A repeating notion is cynicism regarding institutional and governmental *financial* commitment to student support. There is a suggestion that there are "too many political agendas at work, and my perception is that economics drives government interest in supporting students" [6]. Educators explain that "the modern neoliberal university is driven by economist discourses and priorities focused on speed, growth and efficiency" [2]. Educators speculate whether the allocation of resources reflects true commitment to support or if "the university and the government do social justice to keep people like us happy, but they are motivated by money and power and are essentially neoliberal" [4]. The point was raised that, "within a neo-liberalised framework, the challenge lies in balancing the pursuit of profit with a genuine desire to provide robust student support for

student success" [7]. These doubts create a frustrating environment where the sincerity of support efforts is continually questioned, undermining educators' confidence in the institutional support framework.
Another crucial institutional barrier faced by the practitioners is the struggle for recognition and acknowledgment of the efforts required to support equity students effectively:

> I do not feel that my efforts to support students are recognised ... same for other colleagues. Unless universities start to see student support as a time intensive activity that requires a sense of skill and thoughtfulness, nothing will change in this regard. [3].

"[I] fully believe the institution wouldn't have a clue about what I do or who I am. [I would like] recognition for what we do" [6]. Within the sector, "to be recognised as a good Enabling educator one must be, and more importantly be seen to be, determinedly supportive whatever the problem presented" [2]. This leads to a paradoxical predicament for educators with "no form of accountability when it comes to providing 'good' student support" [4]. This tension can lead to feelings of frustration and undervaluation, as educators strive to meet students' needs.

Time and Workload

Educators noted how unrealistic expectations were regarding the time needed to provide effective support to students. The data reveals that "Enabling education is different and more demanding than other forms of teaching and we need more time to support our students through to successful completion" [2]. This reflection sums up the sentiment: "I am allocated ... half an hour per student across a whole teaching session ... I think it is completely unrealistic that half an hour per student is long enough" [3]. This creates challenges for educators to balance other responsibilities. Workload models fail to account for this intensive support, leaving much of the work invisible and unacknowledged. "Another 2 or 3 hours in every day would help me support student better .... Something allocated in the workload" [4].

Educators acknowledged that "requiring support can include administrative and enrolment concerns" [3] which can impede the smooth delivery of support services. Examples are "clashes in student timetables, enrolment complications, subject selection problems, or issues related to the student management system" [7]. The bureaucratic challenges and the need for constant administrative intervention frustrate educators, who feel these tasks detract from their primary role of teaching and providing direct student support "a job that can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the weight of... reporting and administration" [2]. It was suggested that more administrative support for educators would benefit students and the university, with one saying, "personally I think a lot of the admin that we do could be done from someone less qualified (and therefore paid less) leaving the educators more time to educate!!!" [4].

Technology

Another sub-theme, perhaps somewhat related to administration, was concerns around balancing technology and human-centric solutions. Educators do their best to embrace technology and "leverage all available technological options to enhance engagement and facilitate a dynamic learning environment" [1]. One educator noted "we could all use ongoing training with things like Zoom or Teams, AI – we need to be up-to-date … so we can use it in our classes to support students academically" [4]. In contrast, educators caution against over-reliance on technology, emphasising the importance of human connections. "Student support is not always about technological innovation either, although that tends to be what institutions value and reward most ... Technology is not the answer, people are" [2].

Lack of Comprehensive Support Services for Students

Educators advocate for a holistic approach with a combination of psychological, emotional, and academic assistance to effectively support students. Care must be taken in "communicating and promoting to students all the support services that are available to them," [7]. This will then "empower students with knowledge and familiarise them with the student services offered at the university" [6]. While "student support can also be embedded in what we do" [3] it was evident educators feel there is a place for specialised services, such as the library, International Office, disability support, and counselling. However, the implementation of such comprehensive support systems is often hindered by financial considerations. Educators agree that "they are great services but sometimes get backed up and students have to wait" [4]. This adds to their frustration as they strive to provide meaningful support because "student support is not ticking boxes, checking the numbers and making sure that on paper we have opt-in programs available to students" [4]. Instead, "I believe that providing students with a comprehensive toolkit of strategies is crucial" [1].

Emotional Labour and Boundaries

Educators noted the significance of the emotional toll that student support has and the necessity of strategies to mitigate this. One educator explains, "it is often impossible to separate out emotions, ours and theirs, from the teaching and learning process"

[2]. “It can be difficult to listen to so many hardships, to be around so many emotions, to work through them, it, takes a lot of effort ... I have cried when students tell me about putting their pet down…” [5]. “I’ve experienced enough grief in my own life, and I know that others going through similar things can trigger me a little” [4]. They therefore disclose: “how do I feel after I’ve interacted with students seeking emotional support? Tired. Mostly I feel tired” [4].

The frustration also comes from the institution because “Enabling educators have become positioned as natural indefatigable teacher-carers of the marginalised or underrepresented” [2]. Educators often find it challenging to set appropriate boundaries, balancing the institutional demand to be available for students while also protecting their own well-being. “Being empathetic is expected but is not necessarily recognised or rewarded in a teacher’s performance or time reporting” [2]. This emotional labour can be taxing and necessitates effective self-care practices to prevent burnout. One educator noted “we have to manage our own emotions as the undercurrent to every social exchange” [2]. When facing extreme and sensitive situations “it’s more about coping – it’s about avoiding burnout and continuing despite the emotional labour” [4]. Coping involves different strategies: “there is the occasional time when I’m completely overwhelmed and need to reach out, just stop my job for a bit, go for a walk, chat to colleagues who really understand, or have a ‘mental health’ day away from work. I know if I don’t have this, then I would certainly burn myself out” [5].

Training and Development

Educators feel that existing training does not sufficiently prepare them for the complex and emotionally demanding nature of their roles. “The training that is available on student support seems very mechanical, depersonalised or technical to me and thus removed from the everyday practical realities of supporting students as whole persons” [2]. There is a notable advocacy among educators for further training and supervision relating to self-care as well as caring for students. Despite demand, training is lacking because “it has always been assumed throughout my career that I would know what I was doing in this regard [self-care]” [3].

However, experience may be more useful than training. “[I have had] no training. I have lived experience working in Enabling education for over 20 years” [7]. “I don’t think there is any amount of training that can help you deal with that situation once you find yourself in it, as emotions take over, our primary self-protection reactions overwhelm rational thinking every time” [5]. Educators have found their own ways to self-protect through practice. “I now provide more targeted support, leveraging my understanding of students' needs to reduce emotional fatigue while maintaining the quality of assistance” [1]. Only then might the frustration be alleviated and “interactions with students bring me immense joy and satisfaction, despite the fact that it can be mentally taxing” [7].

Ambiguity of Definition

Significant frustrations were seen among educators regarding the definition and scope of student support where “different people might conjure different images” [4]. Educators’ express concerns about the vague and often misunderstood nature of student support that is “open to subjectivity, perception and context” [6]. For educators “there seems to be a lack of a clear charter outlining the expectations for lecturers to provide consistent support. This ambiguity may lead to variations in the perceived role of lecturers” [1]. Another educator postulated that there was an institutional unwillingness to define support: “I believe it is convenient for my university to not define student support, as leaving it broad means that it can be whatever the institution requires it to be at a given time [which leads to] an ever-expanding requirement without necessarily having a workload attached to it” [3].

Facilitations

This section explores what educators have found beneficial in dealing with complex student needs and overcoming frustrations. It highlights the need for targeting student support strategies towards a more inclusive and proactive approach, aiming to create equitable opportunities for all students to succeed academically and thrive in their personal journeys.

Proactive Approaches and Holistic Support

All educators emphasised the need for “for a holistic approach [and] should encompass psychological, emotional, and academic support” [1]. This may require educators to adopt the right mindset and “a social justice lens” [4]. Educators “are all committed to social justice discourses about supporting equity groups fairly and fully” [2], ensuring that all students receive equitable opportunities to succeed academically and personally. Educators realise “holistic support is vital to help [students] navigate this unfamiliar environment” [1], to fully engage with their academic work. They stress that “learning will not occur without positive classroom environments and a sense of safety. My role is to hold this space for students” [6]. Support “needs to be embedded in the teaching and learning experience” [2]. Any attempts to define student support should encompass a holistic approach with a social justice lens.

Allocating Time and Workload

Educators who received formal inclusion of student support within their workload found that it facilitated their efforts and benefitted students. For instance, "my university has roles that have workload allocated to pastoral care of students which I know is rare" [4]. This role was responsible for providing emotional support as well as referring students to relevant services. Students were introduced to this person prior to commencing study and this created a clear pathway of support. Educators are innovatively managing their time and resources, such as scheduled office hours and dedicated support sessions, to ensure that they can provide necessary support. "I actually have workload to support students, but as always, that is open to interpretation" [5]. Another educator opted to align work priorities to focus on student support by "avoid[ing] leadership roles in the university such as unit coordinator ... I have the time and freedom to really get to know my students. This is a big part of supporting them" [4]. Overall, it was evident it can take negotiation, but workload allocation is highly valued.

Seeking Formal Training and Professional Development

Many educators are seeking professional development opportunities to improve their knowledge on how to more effectively support students' needs "even just with some of the practical skills like use of silence and active listening" [4]. To address more intense challenges, educators emphasise the importance of training in welfare, counselling techniques, mental health first aid, "strategies for addressing a diverse range of student concerns" [1], and "training that enhances my understanding of the evolving needs, learning preferences, and profiles of students" [7]. Recognising their own limitations was also important. "I think training around self-care would always be valuable" [4]. Some educators are seeking out peer-to-peer spaces to share their experiences as a way of being mentored. "I find conferences, round tables, informal discussions, small groups, dinners, and the like much better for learning [and] I really feel we learn from the experiences of others and reflecting between each other" [5]. "I prefer learning [by] observing the practices of respected colleagues" [1]. All activities to support educators' ability to support students were valued.

Caring and Building Rapport

All practitioners in this study noted the importance of building rapport and creating a safe learning environment. One educator explained how "it's creating that safe and welcoming environment in the first place" [4] which is essential for fostering trust and promoting student engagement. By investing time and effort into building meaningful relationships with students, educators not only enhance the learning experience but also provide a foundation for effective support interventions. "I would say that caring for people, listening to them and supporting them emotionally is central to who I am and by default my teaching identity" [4]. In fact, it is seen as an attitude, not just a job: "I also view this as being about a duty of care, and moral and ethical expectations" [3]. These meaningful relationships can be fostered in several ways but there was a focus on communication. "For online students, weekly emails and personalised communication help keep them engaged, while internal students benefit from personal experiences shared during classes, fostering a deeper connection" [1]. "Talking with the students builds rapport ... then if something goes wrong, I can help" [5]. This builds "unconditional positive regard, an ethic of care" [6]. Practitioners linked care with effective education noting that care was a way to support students holistically.

Defining and Delimiting Student Support

Educators called for a consistent definition of student support so that their role was delimited. However, a tension exists as educators also acknowledged the need for autonomy and flexibility. One educator stated "those doing the most teaching on the ground supporting large numbers of non-traditional students need to be supported to come up with their own definitions of what support really is and how it really works through action research instead of just being lectured to by others" [2]. Educators also acknowledged that different stakeholders view student support in vastly different ways. "In a university setting if I said student support ... I think the policy makers might think about counsellors and things that they have thrown money at... rather than the day-to-day student crying in someone's office" [4]. Educators advocated for their efforts to be recognised in any operational definition of support. "[It] really just comes down to one student at a time and maximising the outcome for each and every student" [5]. The evidence from this study clearly demonstrates that educators at the forefront of student support know what works and helps circumnavigate barriers for marginalised students. Any definition of student support would need to take into consideration the many student complexities and define and delimit the role of the educator.

Discussion

The educators in this study observed the diverse needs of their students which is consistent with the literature on Enabling programs and equity group students (See James, 2025). The complex intersection of frustrations facing students requires equally comprehensive student support services. Universities and policy freely acknowledge this (O'Kane et al., 2024), however, a universal definition of student support is non-existent. Universities must navigate the tension between maintaining consistency in providing holistic support and adapting flexibly to the unique, contextual challenges students face. The literature demonstrates that Enabling educators strive to create a safe and welcoming culture of empathy and support (Balloo et al.,

2023) and students report the benefits of this (Seary & Willans, 2020). For these reasons, the insights of Enabling educators should be highly valued, as their teaching context represents expertise in diversity and complexity, yet their perspectives remain largely underrepresented in the literature (Priest & McDougall, 2021).

A significant concern is raised about Enabling educators experiencing burnout (Crawford et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2023; Stokes, 2021). Crawford and Johns (2018) found that supporting students significantly impacted all the Enabling educators in their study, with reported negative effects including worry, distress, concern, feeling unsettled, fatigue, and sleep disturbances. While the literature highlights that emotional labour and associated burnout are common among Enabling educators, this issue may be further exacerbated by a lack of clarity regarding their specific roles in supporting students. Crawford et al. (2018) suggest this is a great concern stating that "the role of the Enabling educator is defined by emotional, moral and political complexity. Questions of what the role is, where it begins and ends … remain open ended" (p. 28). A clear definition of student support could reduce the risk of staff burnout and ultimately improve the student experience, retention and success. As noted, a definition of student support would need to be holistic, complex and allow for flexibility.

An effective policy on student support would consider training and qualifications of those working with students. Educators are often not trained as counsellors or psychologists, making it essential to provide them with clear guidelines on the boundaries of their role, as well as when and how to refer students to appropriate support services (Crawford & Johns, 2018). At many universities, long wait times for counsellors and inadequate coverage create significant challenges (Crawford & Johns, 2018). This leads to a tension for educators who, aware of these shortcomings, may hesitate to refer students for fear of appearing dismissive. However, an equally pressing concern is that well-intentioned educators may extend their support beyond their level of training, potentially compromising both student wellbeing and their own professional boundaries.

Literature strongly supports a whole-of-university approach to student support, particularly during the transition to higher education (Kift et al., 2015). For any support system to be effective, students must not only be aware of the available services and understand how to access them but also possess the self-efficacy to seek help when needed (Won et al., 2021). Barriers such as stigma, low confidence or perceived accessibility can hinder student help-seeking behaviours. The findings of this study reinforce existing literature advocating for a holistic approach to student support, recognising that effective support extends beyond merely providing services—it requires proactive integration into the student experience, clear communication, and fostering an institutional culture that normalises help-seeking (Crawford & Johns, 2018).

Enabling educators in this study, as well as in prior research (Stokes, 2021), have expressed the need for additional time and resources to effectively support students. They advocate for greater recognition of care-focused pedagogies and increased workload allocations to reflect the realities of their roles. Research indicates that workload models often underestimate the time required for pastoral care, teaching, and research responsibilities, while student care remains undervalued within university structures (Motta & Bennett, 2018). Despite these challenges, educators in this study found their roles deeply rewarding, a sentiment echoed in previous research (Balloo et al. 2023; Crawford et al., 2018). Establishing a clear definition of student support, one that delineates the caring responsibilities of academics while acknowledging their workload, could help mitigate burnout and enhance student outcomes.

Conclusion

Despite increasing emphasis in official discourses on enhanced support for students from diverse backgrounds (O'Kane et al., 2024), the term "support" remains poorly defined and understood. A clear definition of student support is essential and should be shaped by higher-level policies, training and development, holistic support frameworks, and recognition of workload demands. Our research suggests that educators, as well as students, require support due to challenges such as overwork, fatigue, health problems, mental health struggles, and financial crises. As Enabling educators take on the responsibility of supporting a diverse range of students, the demands of this role can lead to frustration and burnout, highlighting the need for support structures for educators themselves. This study fills a significant gap in the literature by exploring Enabling educators' perspectives on student support, particularly within the context of working with large numbers of students who face significant challenges in academic discourse.

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