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Increasing Accessibility to Academic Support in Higher Education for Diverse Student Cohorts

ABSTRACT

Academic support at Australian universities has become an important aspect of higher education, as student cohorts continue to diversify, and universities need to ensure the students' success and the institutions' reputations. Often, students in need do not access academic support services and little is known about what influences students' decisions to seek academic support. This small-scale qualitative study aims to clarify why students (do not) engage in support and what could be changed to make services more accessible and engaging. Semi-structured interviews revealed that the promotion of services needs to be improved and public stigma about seeking academic help should be addressed to normalise accessing academic support services at university. A high standard of ease of use and the opportunity to participate in support in various modes (e.g. online, face-to-face, peer learning, individual learning) contribute to the helpfulness and the overall positive perception of academic support services.

KEYWORDS

academic help seeking, diverse student cohorts, widening participation, higher education

INTRODUCTION

"Help-seeking behaviours (…) are central to the learning process and have a profound impact on academic success" (Wirtz et al. 2018, 62). Given the increasingly diverse student cohorts (Stefani 2008) and varying entry standards at Australian universities, academic help seeking is becoming more important to ensure student success (McIntosh et al. 2021). Seeking help in the academic context includes discipline and content specific help from, for example, lecturers and tutors, but also generic academic skills advice, such as academic writing and numeracy support.

The aim of all faculty members involved in providing academic support should be to provide developmental rather than prescriptive advice (Alexitch 2002). Developmental advising is a collaborative process between the student and the faculty whereby independent learning is encouraged, whereas prescriptive advising is controlled by the advisor and focusses on outcomes rather than the learning process (Crookston 1994). As an example of developmental advising, or instrumental help seeking, the Learning Centre at James Cook University (JCU) providing academic skills support aims to "facilitate independent, successful learning" (James Cook University 2021a). JCU offers a range of support services that are further explained in the results section.

Seeking academic help has been shown to be beneficial for student success (Chen 2017; Collins 2012). However, often students, mostly those in need, do not engage in seeking help for academic purposes (Hoyne and McNaught 2013; Mann 2020). Help seeking, particularly help seeking for mental health reasons, has been of great interest in recent literature. Many reasons for not seeking help and person-related characteristics that influence help-seeking behaviour have been identified in the literature. For example, Amarasuriya, Jorm, and Reavley (2018), and Vogel,

Shechtman, and Wade (2010) found that stigma is negatively related to help seeking. Furthermore, personality was shown to be related to help seeking. For example, LaLonde (2013) found that neuroticism was negatively related to help-seeking intentions and Bathje et al. (2014) found that openness was positively related to attitude towards help seeking. Yet, academic help seeking has not seen the same attention in recent research. Only little evidence is available of what impacts a student's decision to seek academic help (Bornschlegl, Meldrum, and Caltabiano 2020).

As student cohorts at Australian universities and perhaps also elsewhere become progressively more diverse, the importance of supporting students to ensure their success and the institutions' reputations is increasing. Academic support increases student success and government funding is often linked to retention rates (McNaught and Beal 2012). Hammond et al. (2015) also saw the importance of academic support and designed a targeted learning session to increase access. "Programs of academic support must meet the needs of students from increasingly diverse backgrounds, with different learning styles and at different stages of learning development" (Waters 2002, 8). In a comprehensive systematic literature review, Bornschlegl et al. (2020) found that various background factors, such as age, gender, and personality, are related to psychological help seeking and academic help seeking. However, not much evidence was found for academic help seeking.

Therefore, this qualitative study investigates the crucial, yet insufficiently researched, topic of academic help seeking with a small, targeted diverse sample of JCU students. In 2021, 17,247 students were enrolled across six campuses (90.19%) and online (9.81%). As this study focussed on JCU students in Australia, the following numbers are related to the students enrolled at one of the Australian campuses or online. In total, 14,578 students were studying at an Australian campus or online. JCU's diverse student body includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (5.16%), mature age students (46.40%), first in family students (47.56%), students from low socio-economic backgrounds (20.26%), and international students (10.56%) (students can belong to more than one of these categories) (N. Emtage, email to Bornschlegl, March 17, 2021). The aim of this study is to identify reasons for students (not) engaging in academic support and to reveal how academic support can be improved to make it more accessible and more engaging for diverse student cohorts at JCU, an Australian University in North Queensland. The following research questions are explored in this study:
1. Why do students (not) engage with academic support services?
2. How should academic support services be designed to make them more accessible and engaging for students?

METHODS
This study used qualitative methods to explore detailed reasons for students' decision to access or to not access available academic support services. This approach was chosen, as not much is known about the students' perceptions of academic support services in general or at JCU. The interviews conducted revealed interesting details about how students seek academic help and how academic support services can be designed to make them more accessible and engaging for students.

Instrument
To keep the interview focussed on the topic of interest (Jamshed 2014), a semi-structured interview was chosen to explore the participants' help-seeking behaviour and perceptions of support services at JCU. As shown in appendix A, the interview consisted of 13 core questions to explore students' reasons for (not) accessing support services and their experiences. Furthermore, there were

16 more detailed questions associated with the core questions (Jamshed 2014) that were asked depending on the participants' previous answers, thereby asking for clarification and examples (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015).

The interview was developed using a range of different steps. Firstly, following Kallio et al.'s (2016) recommendations, knowledge necessary to create interview questions was obtained by conducting an extensive literature review (Bornschlegl, Meldrum, and Caltabiano 2020). In addition, the principal investigator of this study works in academic support and was able to draw on her experience to generate interview questions.

Using this knowledge, the next step was to develop interview questions. This step was then further refined by conducting a pilot test for the interview guide (Kallio et al. 2016). No changes were required to the initial core questions and more detailed questions. The pilot interview, however, showed the researcher the need to be flexible regarding the order of questions during the interview, and that some, more detailed questions were not necessary to be asked depending on the respondents' previous answers.

As suggested by Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2015), the interviews were conducted in a flexible and dynamic way to obtain detailed information about the students' personal perception of academic support services and their academic help-seeking behaviour. As multiple students were interviewed, the interview guide ensured key areas of interest were consistent in all interviews (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015). Furthermore, to ensure voice is given to participants, they were asked if they wanted to provide any additional information on the topic that may not have been covered by the questions in the interview guide. The principal investigator conducted all interviews and may have been familiar to students. To avoid any bias in students' responses, students were ensured that data would be kept strictly confidential, that students could stop taking part in the interview at any time without explanation and that they could withdraw any unprocessed data they had provided.

The interviews lasted between 11 and 32 minutes with an average time of 17 minutes. To ensure effective data capturing, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher (Jamshed 2014).

Sample
The sample was drawn from a preliminary sample of an online survey conducted in March, April, and May 2020, which was part of a larger PhD project. At the time the interview sample was drawn, $N =174$ students had completed the online survey. The students studied nine different courses (programs of study) and were enrolled across five different Australian campuses. The aim of the online survey was to identify student-related variables associated with attitudes towards seeking academic help, academic help-seeking intentions, and academic help-seeking behaviour. An initial analysis of the online survey data was conducted to identify groups of interest that could provide meaningful insight into the students' perception of academic support services and academic help seeking. Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey (2016) explained that in qualitative research the sample is often drawn specifically and purposefully to investigate the phenomenon of interest.

Because of the relationships and differences found in the online survey data, it was attempted to sample students with a range of different characteristics for the qualitative semi-structured interviews. Firstly, students scoring high or low on agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness, three of the Big 5 personality traits (McCrae and Costa 1987), were invited to participate. Furthermore, students of various ages were included in the initial selection of possible interview participants. Recent literature also showed that certain aspects of personality and age affect

academic help seeking (e.g. Ghyasi, Yazdani, and Farsani 2013; Roessger, Eisentrout, and Hevel 2018). Finally, it was attempted to include students from a range of different disciplines, as it was shown that the discipline relates to the students' attitude towards help seeking and their actual help-seeking behaviour. The sample was selected based on these criteria as they were shown to be related to academic help seeking and to ensure students' diverse perspectives are represented in the interview data.

Therefore, 45 students selected to equally represent the characteristics outlined above were contacted and a total of $N = 6$ students agreed to participate in an interview. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the interview participants. The participants had varying personality characteristics, an age range of 19 to 57 years, and were studying five different degrees. Furthermore, only one male student participated in the interview. Overall, based on the analysis of the initial survey responses, a diverse interview sample with crucial different characteristics for academic help seeking was achieved.

Table 1. Interview sample characteristics

Student	Personality	Degree	Gender	Ethnicity	Nationality
1	Low on conscientiousness	Bachelor of Education	Male	Caucasian/ Aboriginal	Australian
2	High on agreeableness	Bachelor of Information Technology	Female	Caucasian	Australian
3	High on neuroticism	Bachelor of Business	Female	Caucasian/ Asian	Australian/ Indonesian
4	High on extraversion	Bachelor of Nursing Science	Female	Not available	Australian
5	High on agreeableness	Bachelor of Psychological Science	Female	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander/Asian	Australian
6	High on agreeableness	Bachelor of Nursing Science	Female	Not available	Canadian

Qualitative data analysis

Data was coded and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a commonly used approach in psychology and health research (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008; Brocki and Wearden 2006), to explore the students' personal experiences with academic help seeking at JCU. IPA is concerned with individuals' experiences in their social, as well as personal world (Shinebourne 2011). The qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 was used to support this process. This approach was chosen for multiple reasons. Its inductive nature was suitable, as previous knowledge about the phenomenon of interest is limited. While deductive analyses work with codes and keywords derived from literature and defined prior to data analysis, IPA allowed the researcher to describe the phenomenon of interest, academic help seeking at JCU, with limited existing research, and define themes emerging from the data (Smith 2004).

Furthermore, IPA supports in-depth qualitative analysis. It is strongly idiographic and suggests that cases are analysed separately before emerged themes are compared for similarities and differences. Therefore, each of the six cases has been coded and analysed separately first, before themes and subcategories within the themes were compared and, if appropriate, combined. In

addition, "IPA operates at a level which is clearly grounded in the text but which also moves beyond the text to a more interpretative and psychological level (Smith 2004, 44)" and, therefore, supports in-depth analysis of qualitative data on multiple levels (Smith 2004).

RESULTS

The data could be categorised into seven main themes: sources of information and support, positive features about academic support services, negative features about academic support services, reasons and motivations for seeking academic help, reasons for not seeking academic help, changes to academic support services, and positive impacts of academic support on studies. The findings will be presented following the structure illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1. Overview of emerged themes
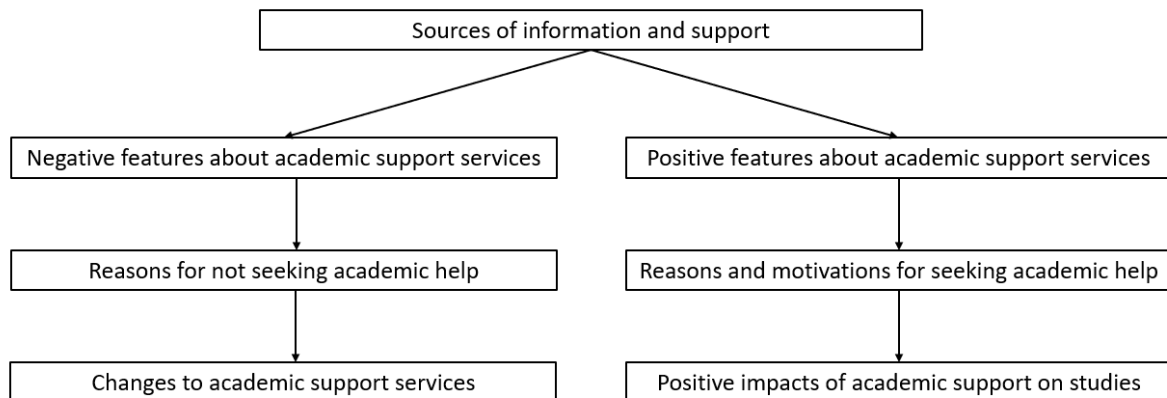
The theme sources of information and support includes the services that were used as well as how students found out about these services. Before discussing positives about the services available, negative features about academic support services are explained. This further leads to reasons students had for not seeking academic help and possible changes to academic support services. Following this, positive features about academic support services are discussed. Reasons for seeking academic help and the students' motivation, whether it was their own or external, was also an important theme that emerged from the data. Finally, the positive impacts of using academic support that students experienced are examined.

Sources of information and support

The academic support service most accessed by the participants was PASS, Peer Assisted Study Sessions, which is available for selected first and second year subjects (units of study). PASS integrates subject specific content with academic skills in an informal learning environment where students can study together (for more information see James Cook University 2020e). Students' feedback was mostly positive. Student 3 explained "Uh well that PASS class, they definitely helped a lot. I see many students loving PASS class, getting interaction (...). But PASS has helped. I know that some of my classes don't have PASS classes, which is disappointing." However, the collaborative approach in PASS classes did not work for student 5. Student 5 indicated they did not enjoy peer learning. As this service is primarily provided in first year, participants also spoke about attending PASS in their first year. For example, student 4 mentioned "I did that the first year I was there, and I signed up with a mentor and a thing called PASS."

The second most accessed academic support services were the Mentor Program and the Indigenous Education and Research Centre (IERC). "The JCU Student Mentor Program matches experienced, successful undergraduate students (mentors) with commencing undergraduate students from the same course of study" (see James Cook University 2020f). The participants did not have any negative comments about this program. Instead, the mentor program was perceived very positively. For example, student 4 experienced that "the mentors are really good because they are very high achieving students from the previous year. So, they are sort of still on the ground when it comes to the content of the subject." Student 2 also explained why the mentors were helpful.

> *I knew exactly where to go, who to see if I had problems and I had two, I had a fantastic mentor in, when I went to do my uhm, when I did my, when I did my first degree. And for this degree I had a fantastic one as well and I went to see him a few times how to, you know "help me with this, help me locate this or locate that."*

Despite a range of different services, the IERC also provides study assistance and a learning environment with peer support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at JCU (see James Cook University 2020d). There were also no negative comments about this service. The service was perceived as positive and helpful in different ways. For example, student 1 enjoyed being able to meet other people in the Centre, whereas student 5 and 6 experienced the IERC as a safe and non-judgemental study space.

> *Uhm and with the IERC, it was just, it's a, it felt like a good uhm, like non-judgemental kinda community that I could just go to in between classes and it would be a good place for study if I needed to study or recuperate if I needed to recuperate and so on (student 5).*

> *And actually be with the girls in there and actually help, get them to help me with uhm again, just looking at the structure of my essays. Uhm and even if it was just bouncing ideas backwards and forwards, or even having that safe space to be able to just sit and uh it was sort of like, it was locked and you could just sit in there and work all the way through and I felt, I felt very safe there, as well (student 6).*

In the Learning Centre, students can receive learning support in individual or group consultations with a Peer Advisor or a Learning Advisor in a range of different areas, such as academic writing, maths, statistics, and study skills (see James Cook University 2020g). Student 4, who accessed the Learning Centre for support with medical calculations thought "the Learning Centre was awesome actually. They put on a lot more uhm tutorials and such to get people pass." The Learning Centre and other services, such as the library, also provide learning support on the JCU website in the form of pdfs (also available as printed booklets) and interactive webpages, which was used by student 1, student 2 and student 3, and perceived as helpful.

The Student Centre, which supports students with a range of administrative tasks and provides subject and course advice, was mentioned by student 2 (see James Cook University 2020c). The student used the Student Centre to seek help regarding the subject choice for her degree. All participants knew about the online after-hours service Studiosity for academic skills support (see Studiosity 2020) but only student 4 used the service and student 1 reported regretting not using the service. Other sources of support were library staff, lecturers and tutors, tutoring and extracurricular workshops.

The students raised three different sources where they received information about the above described services. Firstly, highlighting the importance of orientation, student 2, student 4, and student 6 reported that they found out about the services during orientation week or during the first week of the semester. As student 2 explained, "they were told to me when, on my very first day." Student 4 and student 6 mentioned that they also received information from the JCU website. Lastly, student 6 also used subject outlines (syllabuses) to find out about available services.

Negative features about academic support services

Only two negative features about the available academic support services were mentioned. Student 5 mentioned that she did not enjoy the peer learning when accessing PASS. She explains "It was very collaborative. I'm, I don't particularly enjoy group projects." Student 6 reported that she does not like the fact that Studiosity is online. She explained "I tend to be old-fashioned and a bit old-school, so wanting to go and see someone face-to-face." Furthermore, she said "I guess feeling a bit uhm foolish because I am older and because I don't want to be asking them dumb questions and wasting their time." These negative features may also be seen as positive features by other students; however, they may be reasons for not accessing academic support services.

Reasons for not seeking academic help

The participants mentioned a range of different reasons for not seeking academic help. The most frequent reason was that it was not necessary. Student 1 explained "I just didn't feel like I felt like I had enough support already." Similarly, student 5 said "I didn't feel that I needed an extra help on top of that." Student 2 and student 4 clarified that some services did not apply to them, for example, visiting the IERC is not applicable for non-Indigenous students. Student 4 also highlighted that "whatever is more pressing is what you do." This shows that students prioritise different academic needs and access or do not access services accordingly.

Another important reason for not accessing academic support is the lack of knowledge about particular services. For example, student 1 suggested "I didn't really uhm learn much about it myself, so I guess I didn't really do enough research on my part" and student 3 described that a service has been mentioned during orientation but was then forgotten. Student 6 explained that she does not "really know how to use the Learning Centre" and said, "I think there is probably a lot that I am not aware of."

Furthermore, student 2 and student 3 described two instances where academic support services would have been accessed but were not available. For example, student 3 did not access the online service Studiosity because there is a time limit on how long a student can use the service and she wanted to keep her time for the future. However, she never decided to use the service. Student 2 explained how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the availability of PASS sessions and the impact on her studies.

> *I wanted to join a PASS group, but they, but they didn't have the PASS, for, for uhm, what is it, for [subject name deleted to support anonymity of student 2]. It would have been a lot easier if they had the PASS, but then Covid came along and they didn't have it. Whereas with the year before, they had the PASS for uhm [subject name deleted to support anonymity of student 2]. And that would have helped a lot with [subject name deleted to support anonymity of student 2]. I found that was hard.*

Student 1 mentioned three other reasons for not accessing academic support services, which were all related to his personal circumstance rather than the nature of the service: lack of organisation, laziness, and not having enough time. For example, there was not enough time to obtain feedback for an assignment before it needed to be submitted.

Another important reason, public stigma, was described by student 3. Public stigma is defined as the perception that seeking help is socially not accepted (Vogel, Wade, and Haake 2006). Student 3 described that "seeking help to [her] is like saying that [she is] struggling a lot and [she does not] want anyone to perceive that." She continued that she feels judged when seeking academic help and compared it with seeking help from a guidance counsellor:

> *Student: I feel like, like the, going to the guidance counsellor, there is very much judgement about guidance counselling. I think that's, so, I think I still had that in my mind, I guess.*
> *Interviewer: Okay, yeah. What about, how do you feel about seeking help for, let's say statistics or for an essay? Do you feel the same way about that?*
> *Student: Uhm yeah, yes I do, yeah.*

The negative features, online learning, and peer learning, mentioned by student 5 and student 6 were not explicitly mentioned as reasons for not seeking academic help. However, they could still contribute to the decision not to use a particular service. Furthermore, the reasons for not seeking academic help are a valuable basis for considering possible changes to existing academic support services to make them more accessible and engaging for students.

Changes to academic support services

When participants were asked how academic support services would work better for them or what could be changed so they would access academic support services more, student 1, student 2, student 5, and student 6 initially mentioned that the services work well and that they cannot think of anything as to how the support could be improved. As the interviews continued, more ideas as to how academic support services could be improved arose.

One of the most frequent ideas was changes regarding the information provided about academic support services. The comments regarding the information provided were twofold. On the one hand, student 3 explained that academic support services need more promotion and suggested that there could be hands-on presentations of academic support services to illustrate to students what is being offered and how the services work. She also added "I think Studiosity just needs more promotion about it, I think. I think some students tend to forget about it that there is an option there." On the other hand, student 1 and student 6 described that "there is so much information. There is such a flooding of information but there are some things that would really make a huge difference to your learning ability" (student 6). Student 1 also suggested that more specific information needs to be provided and student 6 explained that she does not know whether she is eligible for particular academic support services. Student 6 also suggested that some information about services available should be conveyed by lecturers at the right time in the semester.

Another frequently mentioned possible change is to provide more peer learning opportunities. Although this was also seen as a negative feature by some participants, student 1, student 3, and student 6 perceived this as something positive and as something that could improve services. For example, student 3 explained that she would access academic support services more easily if she could access them together with other students. Student 6 suggested that she would

benefit from the mentor program beyond the first year. Student 1 also described why more peer learning is important to him:

> *More chances to get to meet people I think would be good. Especially for me because I just moved here. Uhm that's a big thing that I felt like I was lacking. I think that was and like a, I guess, a solid group to like get to know and then and then you can like that are in the same course and you can build rapport with them and then you can like end up working with them. I think that's probably the thing I would change the most.*

Other suggestions to improve academic support services included a bridging subject to learn necessary academic skills, increased availability in terms of the number of support staff and in terms of business hours, and to normalise help seeking to reduce stigma. For example, student 4 said "more people offering. Cause when they get hammered, they get really, really hammered. When, when the med calculations thing was happening, uh we couldn't see them. Uhm and they were just getting slammed by 250 students." Student 3 suggested that it should be promoted that it is acceptable to seek help and that many students need support and are accessing academic support services.

Positive features about academic support services

Although mentioned as a negative feature by one student, four other students, student 1, student 3, student 4, and student 6, perceived peer learning as a positive feature of academic support services. In this context, the students particularly mentioned the PASS program and the mentor program. Being able to hear the perspective on subject content of high achieving and next level up students was an important aspect of peer learning. Student 4 highlighted the importance of drawing on the experience of mentors with regard to subject content. Student 6 described similar learning experiences in PASS classes:

> *If PASS classes are part of this as well, then I really enjoyed being able to go and ask the questions of another student or like an older next level up student who understood what the lecturers were looking for, what the issues were, what things were highlighted and what was important. I enjoyed having that sort of peer-to-peer.*

Participants also thought that the services provided quick feedback. Student 4, student 5, and student 6 mentioned online as well as face-to-face services in this context. For example, Studiosity promises writing feedback on a draft within 24 hours (student 4; Studiosity 2020). Student 5 explained that lecturers and tutors respond quickly, and student 6 enjoyed face-to-face library support because she received feedback instantaneously. In this context, student 6 also emphasised that face-to-face support is an important positive aspect of academic support services for her.

Student 5 and student 6 explained that the academic support they received was easy to understand. Student 5 highlighted that "they explained things in like layman's terms. They weren't too uhm difficult to understand." Furthermore, student 2, and student 6 mentioned that they felt supported when accessing academic support services and the feeling that someone was there for them was perceived as positive. In addition, student 4 and student 5 described academic support services as non-judgemental.

Other positive features include social aspects of academic support services and more time to clarify content. For example, student 1 spoke about the friendly culture in the IERC:

I liked the, just the friendliness in the group, everyone was really welcoming, and it was just like it's okay to ask for help. That was like the first kind of thought that I got, which was really really nice to see. Uhm and then, probably my favourite thing that actually just like the uh personable culture or like the approachable culture, I guess.

And student 4 spoke about consolidating knowledge in PASS classes:

They could go back over something and do it a little bit slower than uh you know, the lecturer or whatever. Uhm and because the lecturer hasn't time in you know the criteria to get through, the PASS guys can just look at everyone and say, "okay so no one really got it" and they will slow down.

Reasons and motivations for seeking academic help

Participants accessed academic support services for a range of different academic reasons: academic writing, mathematics, statistics, course content, course/subject advice, IT, organisation, and social aspects. The most frequently mentioned reasons were academic writing and statistics. Student 1, student 2, student 3, student 4, and student 6 accessed support services for academic writing support and student 2, student 3, and student 5 accessed statistics support.

The motivations to seek help also varied among the participants. While two students mentioned increasing academic success motivated them to seek support, one student described the fear of failing as encouragement to access academic support services. For example, student 6 described that she wanted to avoid losing marks and increase her success: "Wanting again, wanting to do well, because if I can research anything, if I am losing marks for just the way I am presenting my work, not referencing correctly and not academically writing, then I just losing points unnecessarily."

Furthermore, student 2, student 4, and student 6 said it was their own idea to access academic support services. However, student 2 and student 6, as well as student 1, student 3, and student 5 also mentioned that a referral through others motivated them to seek academic help. For example, student 4 and student 5 received a referral from their lecturer or tutor. In addition, student 3 and student 5 said that they were motivated by their peers and student 1 described how accessing one service led to accessing other services:

Well I looked at the PASS program as well, I did that. Uhm yeah so in one of the first lectures that I had, uhm in the literacy and English one I think. Uhm yeah so that was like a big kind of like opening my eyes to like the start and then I kind of uhm applied for a like mentor that was the start of that and then they kind of referred me to more and more, cause I went which was good.

Positive impacts of academic support on studies

All participants perceived the academic support services they accessed as positive and helpful. In more detail, students found the support services helpful in different ways and their studies were impacted positively, yet diversely. Student 1, student 4, student 5, and student 6 reported that accessing academic support services has impacted their studies positively in terms of organisation. In this regard, student 1 and student 5 referred to organising a day and balancing workload. Student 5 explained how her studies were impacted:

Uh a lot of the tips, like how to uh balance everything uhm and like the whole table analogy with the four legs, if you don't have all four legs it's gonna tumble over kinda thing. Uhm and yeah putting that into place has helped especially in my third-year subjects and the more difficult subjects.

Student 4 and student 6 described how accessing academic support services has supported them in being more organised when processing information. For example, student 4 said that she learned to use the information provided in med calculations, to better use the marking rubric for assignments and, therefore, to be more structured and organised. She reported she used to get overwhelmed but can now stay calm and work through the task. Student 6 reported that she now knows exactly what to look for when writing references and can apply what she has learned to different referencing styles.

Furthermore, student 4 and student 5 perceived that their confidence has increased as a result of accessing academic support services. Student 4 said "I think I am becoming a more confident student" and student 5 explained that it has helped her to confirm that she was going in the right direction with her assignments. Additionally, student 2 and student 5 reported that accessing academic support services supported their persistence with their studies and has helped them to get through challenging subjects and through their degree. In the same context, student 5 reported that accessing support has relieved her perceived stress related to her studies.

Overall, there has been a lot of positive feedback about available academic support services at JCU. However, participants also mentioned negative features and possible changes to support services for improvement. In addition, characteristics that have worked well and have had positive impacts on the students' studies are important and should be further developed and fostered. In the following sections, the participants' responses are discussed in the light of current literature and recommendations to further improve academic support services for diverse student cohorts are made.

DISCUSSION
Promoting academic support services

The findings show that students seem to know about different services and access a range of diverse services. However, students do not seem to have a full picture of the academic services available at JCU. The lack of knowledge about services was even explicitly mentioned as a reason for not accessing particular services. McNaught and Beal (2012) also found that a "lack of uptake was underpinned by a lack of awareness about the services on offer" (201) at a university in New South Wales and Western Australia, and Raby (2020) reported that the majority of students seek advice from familiar support staff rather than directly accessing more relevant services. Furthermore, one student suggested offering a bridging subject for academic skills. This, as well as a bridging course, are already being offered (James Cook University 2020b). This further supports the claim that students are not fully aware of the academic support services on offer.

The importance of orientation week and the mentor program regarding the transmission of information about academic support services was conveyed multiple times in the participants' answers. However, students also spoke about a flooding of information via emails at the beginning of their studies and throughout their studies. Conversely, the participants suggested more promotion is needed for academic support services. Consequently, in order to make academic support services more easily accessible for students, information about the services needs to be provided more

effectively in a way which avoids a flooding of information and, at the same time, ensures students' adequate knowledge about what is available.

McNaught and Beal (2012) found that the most effective way to make students aware of services is through emails and their lecturers. The authors successfully changed their marketing approach as evident through increased use of academic support services. This included the introduction of a strategy for lecturers and tutors to promote programs directly to their students and the use of video testimonials on the services' website. A good strategy for academic staff to promote services to their students could help avoid flooding students with information, as lecturers and tutors would be able to determine relevant services at the right time.

Consistent with the concept of "relentless welcome," which promotes that orientation practices need to occur throughout a student's time at university (Teaching Matters blog 2019), email (or other preferred communication channels) promotion through lecturers and tutors could function as a more detailed reiteration of relevant academic support services after students first hear about all services available during orientation. This might provide students with the necessary knowledge to access academic support services at the right time during their studies. For example, if a subject requires students to submit an assignment in a new academic genre, students would benefit if the lecturer promotes available academic writing services, such as Learning Advisors and Studiosity, sometime before the submission date.

Furthermore, relevant video testimonials could be used in the emails (or other preferred communication channels) to better promote services. Appiah (2006) found that using video testimonials on commercial websites were more effective than text or picture-based testimonials or no testimonials at all. One way for JCU to address these issues is to ensure close collaboration between academic support staff and academic staff. Both parties can work together to create informative and convincing promotion material. Promotion schedules could be developed for each subject or each year level in a discipline, which provide an overview of assessments, their due dates, other important dates, and related services. Academic support staff can create promotion packages in collaboration with academic staff that are then distributed to students by their lecturers in a timely fashion.

Modes of academic help seeking

Another interesting finding is that peer learning, as well as online learning, were perceived as both positive and negative features of academic support services. Thompson and Mazer (2009) found that peer learning can be very beneficial, as students reported that their peers could explain content more effectively than academic staff in some cases. Furthermore, emotional support that students may receive from their peers in a peer learning environment is also beneficial for students to reduce the feeling of isolation (Waters 2002). However, as shown in this study, some students do not enjoy peer learning. Student 5, whose ethnicity is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, as well as Asian reported she did not enjoy collaborative peer learning. Idris, Ion, and Seery (2019) also found that Asians accessed peer tutoring less compared to other groups. Similarly, online learning can be seen as positive and negative. The participants of this study reported the convenience of online services, but also the disadvantages, such as waiting times, misunderstandings, and insecurity to use the service due to limited IT knowledge. This shows the need for JCU to continue to offer different modes of academic support. Although it might be difficult to offer peer learning and face-to-face learning opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic, alternatives, such as synchronous rather than asynchronous distance learning support, should be considered. Tisdell and Shekhawat (2019) found

that video conferencing was very beneficial in an e-mentor program but archiving the videos for later access was just as important.

Reducing public stigma

One student in this study reported that perceived public stigma was the main reason for not accessing academic support services. She further suggested that academic help seeking needs to be normalised for her to access support services more frequently. McNaught and Beal (2012) argue that the normalisation of academic help seeking is crucial for a holistic university experience. "Just as it is 'normal' for a university student to join a social club, or sporting team, it should be 'normal' to attend an academic support offering" (McNaught and Beal 2012, 202). The authors also found that names of services were perceived as negative and stigmatising, as they reinforced a deficit nature of help seeking. The names of the services and the language used to promote them should be aspirational rather than remedial. McNaught and Beal (2012) further argue that locating academic support services in open spaces supports perceiving the attendance of academic support as normal. Hammond et al. (2015) also successfully normalised academic help seeking by offering an assignment targeted peer learning session in an open space. They argue that "seeking help within a group environment could avoid individuals feeling stigmatised for help-seeking" (181). JCU already offers academic support in open spaces and often uses positive wording, for example "Getting the most from your readings," to name their services. However, it should be considered if academic support services not provided in open spaces could be showcased throughout the semester to promote the services and to normalise accessing them.

Usability of academic support

Participants mentioned a range of characteristics that made academic support easy and effective to use. Firstly, students enjoyed that feedback was usually provided very quickly. While students perceived immediate feedback during face-to-face sessions as positive, they also perceived that online support services, such as Studiosity or lecturers and tutors contacted via email, managed to provide feedback promptly. Ferguson (2011) also found that it is beneficial for students' learning if feedback is provided quickly. Therefore, it is important for academic support staff to uphold a quick turn around when providing feedback. Furthermore, students benefited from the use of understandable language by academic support staff. Wiggins (2012) also argued that feedback needs to be user-friendly and understandable to be effective. It was suggested that the availability of academic support staff should be increased. However, this needs to be considered in relation to students' needs and resources available. Better promotion of existing services may be more efficient and equally beneficial for students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, services were perceived as valuable and helpful and should be continued to be offered. However, there is some room for improvement to further increase the accessibility of these services. Firstly, the strategy to promote academic support services should be reconsidered. From the participants' comments and other findings in the literature, it can be concluded that more targeted promotion, possibly spread throughout the semester, is needed to avoid a flooding of information for students but to ensure students have adequate knowledge about services on offer. One recommendation is to send promotion emails through lecturers or tutors with video testimonials to students just in time for upcoming tasks in their subjects (Appiah 2006; McNaught and Beal 2012).

Secondly, as students seem to have different preferences regarding the modes of academic help seeking, for example, peer learning, individual learning, online support, and face-to-face support, the services should continue to offer multiple modes and consider if additional modes could be included to make the services more accessible for students. Particularly in the time of a global pandemic, services may need to create new ways of learning and support to meet the needs of the institution's students. Furthermore, especially when increased online support is necessary, the services should continue to uphold their high standards of quick turnaround times and student friendly, understandable communication to maximise the benefits for students (Ferguson 2011; Wiggins 2012).

Finally, academic support staff should continue to work on reducing public stigma about academic help seeking and to normalise seeking support (McNaught and Beal 2012). Various changes, such as renaming services, offering support in open spaces, and offering peer learning opportunities, to normalise help seeking can be considered depending on already existing services and available resources (Hammond et al. 2015; McNaught and Beal 2012). Reconsidering some approaches to valuable and beneficial existing academic support services may further improve services and make them more accessible for diverse student cohorts to foster academic success for all students (Wirtz et al. 2018). Mann (2020) suggested co-creating academic support services with students using design thinking to gain individual insights into their experiences and to design effective services.

This study was conducted with a small sample from an Australian University in North Queensland. JCU has very diverse student cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, mature age students, school leavers and international students. It was attempted to represent this diversity in the sample and a range of different age groups, personality types, and disciplines were included. Although various ethnicities were represented, the students' nationality was mostly Australian, and no international students participated in the interview. Additionally, male students were underrepresented in the sample. This should be taken into consideration when making changes to academic support services based on the findings of this study. Furthermore, the findings may not apply to all universities and student cohorts. However, the findings can provide valuable insight into students' perceptions about the use of academic support services when considered carefully in other contexts. Future research would benefit from using larger samples, possibly from a range of institutions, to add to the findings of this study and to gain comprehensive insights into students' perceptions of academic support services in other contexts.

ETHICS
Research was approved through James Cook University's ethical review processes.

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APPENDIX A

Table A.1. Interview guide

Core questions	Associated, more detailed questions
What academic support services have you accessed?	Any other support services when considering the complete time you have been enrolled at JCU?
What were your reasons for accessing these services?	Any other reasons? Was it your idea to access this service or did someone suggest it to you?
What encouraged you to seek help from the academic support services you have used?	How did you find out about the services? Did someone else ask you to seek help?
What academic support services have you not accessed yet?	
What are your reasons for not accessing these services?	
What worked well for you when accessing academic support services?	Can you give me a specific example?
How helpful were the services you have accessed for you?	Why? How was it helpful?
How has accessing these services affected your studies?	How have you applied what you learned?
Are there any support services you access on a regular basis?	If yes, why? If no, why not?
Are there any support services that you have accessed only once or twice?	If yes, why? Would you access this service again?
What should be changed for you to access support services more or to access support services you have not accessed yet?	Is there anything else you can think of? Can you think of a specific example for a particular service?
How would academic support services work better for you?	Can you tell me a specific example?
Is there anything else you would like to add?	