

N E X U S

*The Australian University of Theology
Research & Scholarship Magazine*



AGNESLEUNG.

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Issue focus:

Reflections on Student Support & Wellbeing

The NEXUS Bookshelf

New Books by AUT Staff & Faculty

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November 2025



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From the Editor

Reflections on Student Support & Wellbeing

Welcome to the November issue of NEXUS, the Australian University of Theology's bi-annual research magazine.

At the AUT, our graduate attributes include not only a desire to see our students "study and think to the glory of God," but we also hope our graduates will be people who "engage with human experience intellectually and emotionally." But this raises questions about what it means for us to be theological institutions that model this intellectual and emotional engagement. How well are we caring for our students as we journey with them to reach these goals?

This issue of NEXUS explores student wellbeing and support across the diverse landscape of Australian theological education. What emerges is both a challenge and an invitation: to move beyond ad hoc care toward intentional, inclusive communities where every student can flourish.

When I put out the call for contributions for the current issue, I had no idea what might arrive in my inbox! In the end, we have a rich collection of contributions from educators across our consortium who are thinking seriously about student support and wellbeing in their own contexts. Despite the different locations and teaching contexts of the contributors, you will find that there is a common thread running through their articles: truly inclusive support isn't simply about providing specialised supports for students (although this is an important part of what we need to do!), but it is also about reimagining our pedagogical practices, our communication strategies, and our very understanding of student success in our theological context. It's about recognising that academic progress, spiritual growth, and personal wellbeing are deeply interconnected.

Our first response might be to question whether we can resource the kinds of robust student support initiatives suggested in this issue. However, the real question is, with fewer enrolments in theological education globally, can we really afford not to invest in caring well for the students we have and ensuring they succeed in their studies? After all, if we are committed to seeing students "formed in Christlikeness and equipped to be God's agents of hope and transformation in the world," as Gayle Kent argues in her article, then their student wellbeing isn't peripheral - it's foundational.

Louise Gosbell

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The NEXUS Bookshelf

New books by AUT Consortium Faculty and beyond

AUT Consortium Staff, Faculty & Fellows

Authored volumes

Michael Bird (Ridley), *Whispers of Revolution: Jesus and the Coming of God as King*. Apollos, 2025.

Geoffrey Harper (SMBC), *'You Shall Be Clean': A Biblical Theology of Defilement and Cleansing*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 65. Apollos, 2025.

Tim Patrick (BCSA), *The Amazing Depth of the Simplest Truth: The Gospel and Gospel Theology*. IVP, 2025.

Brian Rosner (Ridley), *Strengthened by the Gospel: A Theology of Romans*, New Testament Theology Series. Crossway, 2025.

Murray J. Smith (Christ College), *Jesus' Speech on the Mount of Olives: A 12 Week Study*. Crossway, 2025.

David I. Starling (Morling), *1 Corinthians*. Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary. Lexham Press, 2025.

Edited volumes

Michael Bird and Scott Harrower (Ridley), *A Handbook to Second-Century Christianity*. Baylor University Press, 2025.

Have a new book coming out in the first half of 2026 and want it included in NEXUS? Let us know at research@aut.edu.au.



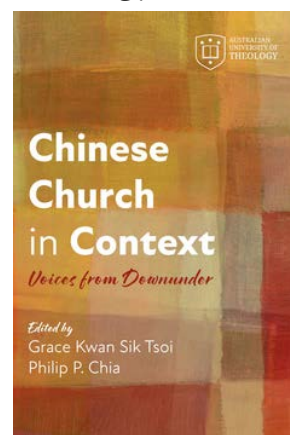
Geoffrey Harper (SMBC)



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With the change to becoming a full University, we have re-launched our publication series published through Wipf and Stock. The Australian College of Theology Monograph Series has now become the **Australian University of Theology Publications**. We are pleased to

announce the release of the first book in the series: *Chinese Church in Context: Voices from Down-under* edited by **Grace Kwan Sik Tsoi** and **Philip P. Chia** from Chinese Theological College Australia.





Beyond the AUT

Constantine R. Campbell and James R. Harrison (eds.), *Paul in his Jewish and Graeco-Roman Context: Theological, Ecclesial, Social, and Political Perspectives*. AUCD Press, 2025.

Ben Boland, *Priceless People: Loving Older People and People Living with Dementia*. Christian Focus Publications, 2025.

Sally Douglas, *Rewilding Prayer: God Beyond Gender, Faith Beyond Formulas*. Wipf & Stock, 2025.

Danielle Treweek, *Single Ever After: A Biblical Vision for the Significance of Singleness*. The Good Book Company, 2025.

Beyond Serendipity: Reimagining Student Support in a Changing World

Gayle Kent - Vice-Principal (Students & Community), Morling College

Many of us have experienced serendipitous moments of student support: a passing comment at the end of a lecture that leads to deep discussion, a quick knock on the office door that becomes an extended 'holy interruption', a conversation over a meal where life and faith intertwine. These encounters often become rich memories for both students and staff: times when we recognise the active presence of God and His invitation to walk with Him and with each other. These are times students remember: "I was seen. I was listened to. Someone cared."

In the past, these serendipitous moments often led to shared care and support. In the days when most of our students were full-time and on-campus, it wasn't unusual for someone to share these moments in a staff meeting or over morning tea. "I had a chat with Julie, and she is struggling. Is she in your unit too?" or "Has anyone checked on Sam today? I didn't see him in class this morning." There was an unspoken assumption that our students were well-known to all, and that if there was a need for support or care, word would reach those who needed to know.

It was our CRM (Client Relationship Management) account manager who first said to me, "You can't rely on serendipity." It was part of their sales pitch, but it has stayed with me. Serendipitous care is valuable and often a response to the Spirit's leading, yet it cannot stand alone.

In the changing world of higher education, we know that student experience is no longer as predictable or centralised as it once was. We must therefore reimagine what it means to support individuals and shape communities that are dispersed, diverse, and digitally connected. Student support and care can no longer depend on us being in the right place at the right time. A reimagined culture of support needs to be supported by intentional design and response, especially if we want to care in a way that is sustainable, equitable, and accessible to every student, in every mode, across every faculty, on every campus.

At Morling we have been increasingly aware of the complexity of our student support ecosystem, especially as a three-campus and



three-faculty college, engaging with students around Australia and beyond. As Larsen et al (2025) observe, a lack of a clear and consistent definition of ‘student support’ in Australian higher education has often resulted in either an unhelpful dichotomy or a blurred understanding of responsibilities and processes between academic and non-academic staff. We need a whole-of-organisation response and support framework that creates a shared space of care; one that is collaborative, holistic, and pastoral at heart.

If we are committed to seeing students formed in Christlikeness and equipped to be God’s agents of hope and transformation in the world, then their wellbeing is not peripheral. Their academic progress, skills development, spiritual growth, and overall flourishing or ‘success’ are deeply connected.

In light of this, we are continually seeking to refine and reimagine our student support framework so that it retains all the relational warmth of the serendipitous moments we cherish and also embeds sustainable and intentional practices in our changing context. This framing pushes us to strengthen our structures: forms, CRMs, coordinated responses, and consistent follow-ups are not just “administrative add-ons.” They are part of delivering a holistic student experience that integrates learning, personal growth, and connection. Over the past few years, this commitment has led to a range of practical initiatives (either new or adapted), including:

- Investing significant time, finances, and training to develop a robust CRM. Salesforce has become a key tool in our student support space, enabling us to capture, understand, and learn each student’s unique story. Led by our Student Services and Admissions teams, the CRM is not merely a place to log data but is an increasingly valuable way for us to understand student engagement across all domains of college life. Importantly, it equips different teams to coordinate care

with insight and context, providing a centralised and visible place for us to respond more meaningfully and avoid siloed or fragmented support.

- Focusing on support during orientation and the first semester experience. This has included creating consistent orientation information and communication to all students (whether or not they could attend an on-campus orientation session), and ensuring that students who complete an academic suitability assessment as part of their admission to study are followed up personally by an Academic Tutor. Tutors also meet with at-risk or vulnerable students to develop Individual Support Plans.
- Expanding our academic support offerings. As Voisin et al. (2023) argue, normalising access to academic support as an option for everyone challenges deficit models of student care, where support is perceived as being offered only to struggling students. At Morling, seeking academic support to develop research and writing skills is framed as a sign of growth, not struggle. Our academic tutors, for example, see students who have been referred to them, but are also available to any student who wants to develop their skills. An invitation is included in every weekly college-wide email. Offering AS003 (Academic Writing and Communication) as a unit designed to benefit any student has also been well received, with a steady number of students enrolled each year.
- Developing clearer pathways and processes for academic staff to raise concerns about students, whether academic and/or pastoral. While this has increased the use of centralised notifications and forms, it has also ensured that the serendipitous moments are captured in some way and that our Student Services team is able to triage and initiate support processes. This has also created a shared ownership of care across the college so that no one bears the burden alone or assumes that others will know a student’s circumstances.
- Developing policies that reflect a whole-of-



organisation response to care. The Australian Universities Accord, and the National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence, for example, require us to take responsibility for integrated and holistic care of those we have the privilege to teach. As we review and rewrite policies and procedures, we do so, not merely for compliance sake, but with a conviction that every person is created in the image of God and worthy of dignity, safety and care.

Of course, there is still much work to be done. Some serendipitous moments pass us by, and sometimes processes fail to work as intended. Yet, as we reimagine student support in these shifting contexts, we recognise the breadth of gifts and skills within our staff team and our shared commitment to see students flourish, growing in knowledge and wisdom as followers of Christ. Our efforts are part of a deeper transformation that we pray God will bring about in the lives of our students as they discern His will and purpose. While we continue to cherish the serendipitous moments as gifts of connection, we are also working together to ensure that every student is seen, known, and cared for.

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Remote But Not Alone: Fostering Wellbeing in Online Education

Diane Hockridge – Educational Designer, Ridley College

Many AUT students study in flexible, online or mixed modes. Fully online students are often less visible to us than those who attend classes on campus. We want to support and care for all our students, regardless of their mode of study, but how can we care well for these less visible students? Our online student cohorts are also remarkably diverse – in terms of age, educational and theological background, location, work and ministry experience and so on. This diversity enriches online classes, but it also makes supporting varied student needs more challenging.

In theological education, we often talk about student learning (and student formation) in terms of “head, heart and hands.” This simple framework actually has solid foundations in educational theory, drawing together cognitive, constructivist, behavioural and situated perspectives on learning into a holistic approach to teaching our students. We can also use the head, heart, hands model to support students academically, socially, and practically.

Like all students, our remote and online students regularly need academic support. Many students are coming to theological learning from other academic fields, or after not having studied for many years. The learning curve for students coming to grips with a text-based and faith-based field of study like theology can be substantial. Academic advice, counselling and tutoring are all essential supports for students. At Ridley College, as well as the tutors who facilitate student learning in each online unit, we also have academic support tutors with whom remote students can make appointments to discuss their assignments, and an ongoing academic counselling service which provides individual course and academic support advice, or referral to professional counselling or other

services as needed. Students who use those services usually comment on how helpful they are; however, not all students engage with these opportunities. How do we support those who might fall through the gaps?

A new academic support strategy we’ve been trialling is offering virtual ‘parallel study sessions.’ These are one-hour sessions hosted on Zoom by a staff member in which students can spend an hour working on a study task in the virtual company of others. Apart from a brief check-in at the beginning and the end of the hour, the time is silent, but with cameras on to preserve the sense of being alongside others in one’s study. This strategy is particularly useful for students who struggle with motivation or procrastination, neurodivergent students, or those who just want to feel they are not alone.

Beyond academic support, online and remote students also need social and pastoral support. Student feedback suggests three key elements that appear to be particularly beneficial for online and remote students. The first is the importance of building an overall supportive culture at the college, one in which all staff, not just teaching faculty, are actively involved in supporting students. Both online and campus students often say that the support from college librarians, academic counsellors, or the registrar’s office was a lifeline for them, helping them through a difficult assignment or a challenging personal crisis. Recognising and celebrating the contribution of all staff in supporting students is one step towards building a supportive college culture. Another important step is ensuring staff are trained and equipped to support student well-being in areas such as SASH (sexual assault or sexual harassment), or intercultural communication.

Secondly, we know that meaningful student-student or peer interaction contributes to student wellbeing. For remote and online students, such interactions may be less frequent. However, there are many ways to incorporate peer interaction into the student experience, such as small-group tasks, study or prayer groups, or regional meetups.

Thirdly, we can encourage students to activate the support of people in their local and church communities. Online study can be hard. Where students have at least one or two people they can turn to for conversations or prayer, it can make all the difference. Talking with someone who has theological training and with whom they can discuss thorny theological questions can be especially helpful. Where such support is not available in the students' local community, colleges can step in to fill the gap.

In some cases, local support extends to more formal arrangements, such as mentoring, coaching, or supervision, either as required elements of course completion or arranged on a personal level. Formalised mentoring and supervision of students is one of the ways in which we can support the development of the 'hands' or practical aspects of theological learning. Indeed, for remote and online students, it is essential that someone sees them functioning in a ministry context. Mentors and supervisors can play a vital role in providing feedback to both students and the college, as well as supporting the development of on-the-ground ministry skills. It can be challenging, however, to find suitable mentors or supervisors for students in remote or unfamiliar areas.

Finally, we can support the well-being of online and remote students by paying attention to the characteristics of both the virtual and physical spaces in which they study. Goodyear encourages educators to think about how these spaces can be shaped to focus attention on and inspire and support learning.[1] By putting ourselves in the shoes of an online learner who has never visited our campus, we can make it easy for students to find their way

around these virtual spaces. We can pay attention to making the virtual spaces in which students learn and interact, such as our Learning Management Systems, or our virtual class interactions, hospitable, welcoming and helpful for student learning.[2] We can ensure these virtual spaces are designed to allow easy access to learning and academic support materials, library resources, and well-being and support services.

Supporting the well-being of online and remote students requires a holistic approach that addresses academic, social, and practical needs. By applying the "head, heart, hands" framework, colleges can offer meaningful academic support, foster peer and staff connections, and encourage local mentoring and supervision. Creating welcoming virtual spaces and recognising the diverse backgrounds and challenges of online learners are also vital. When students feel seen, supported, and connected – even from a distance – they are more likely to thrive in their theological studies and ministry formation.

Footnotes:

[1] P. Goodyear, L. Carvalho, & P. Yeoman, (2021). "Activity-Centred Analysis and Design (ACAD): Core purposes, distinctive qualities and current developments." *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 69, 445-464. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-020-09926-7>

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Breaking the Silence: Supporting Chinese Theological Students' Wellbeing in Australian Seminaries

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Introduction

Within the diverse landscape of Australian theological education, Chinese students represent a significant and growing demographic, yet they sometimes remain invisible in discussions of student wellbeing and support. In theological education, the intersection of academic pressure, cultural adjustment, spiritual formation, and ministry preparation creates unique vulnerabilities for Chinese students who frequently become “silent sufferers.”

The phenomenon of Chinese students' reluctance to seek help is well-documented across Australian higher education, but its implications for theological formation – where pastoral competence and emotional wellbeing directly impact future ministry effectiveness – demand attention from seminary leaders. Research indicates a significant disparity between the high rates of psychological distress reported by Chinese international tertiary students and their low engagement with university-provided counselling and support resources.[1] This article synthesises research findings to explore the reasons for reluctance to seek help and examines strategies for supporting Chinese theological students' wellbeing while respecting cultural values and addressing systemic barriers.

The Silent Suffering Phenomenon

Chinese theological students face a complex web of cultural, linguistic, and systemic barriers that contribute to underutilisation of support services and internalised distress.

Research consistently identifies several key factors that create “silent sufferers” within this population.

Cultural Stigma and Face Concerns

The concept of *mianzi* (face) profoundly shapes Chinese students' help-seeking behaviours. Mental health support is often perceived as admitting weakness or having serious psychological problems, creating shame that extends beyond individual concerns to family and community honour. As Tang observes in her analysis of Asian American psychological patterns, “mental health within Asians and Asian Americans is stigmatised,” leading to what she terms a “code of silence” that protects against perceived loss of face but perpetuates suffering. [2] This cultural dynamic is particularly pronounced in seminary contexts where students may feel additional pressure to model spiritual maturity and resilience.

Collectivistic Cultural Norms

Chinese cultural values emphasising harmony-keeping, emotional restraint, and collective responsibility create preferences for informal support networks over professional services. [3] Students often prioritise not “burdening others” and may present with somatic complaints rather than direct emotional distress, making their needs less visible to Western-trained support staff. [4] This cultural tendency toward emotional restraint and perseverance can mask significant psychological distress until crisis points are reached.

Australia-Specific Stressors for International Students

International students may face unique challenges, and according to Berry's acculturation model, [5] social support and help-seeking behaviours can significantly influence their adjustment process. While research shows that international students are at higher risk for poor mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, due to navigating an unfamiliar host culture, they tend to underuse formal support services. [6] Recent studies indicate that international students are more likely to seek informal support from peers and friends rather than formal help from teachers or counsellors. [7]

For Chinese theological students specifically, these stressors are compounded by the demands of ministry preparation, concerns about social status and financial pressures, and the challenge of maintaining spiritual leadership while experiencing personal struggles. The gap between high need and low service utilisation creates a concerning pattern of hidden distress within seminary communities.

Implications for Seminary Practice

Given these barriers, Australian theological institutions should develop culturally responsive approaches that honour Chinese students' cultural values while providing effective pathways to support.

1. Normalising Help-Seeking and Reducing Stigma

Seminaries should actively work to reframe help-seeking as consistent with Christian discipleship and pastoral effectiveness rather than personal weakness. This requires embedding brief but repeated psycho-education throughout orientation and core formation courses, using language that resonates with Chinese concepts of wellbeing such as security, belonging and flourishing.

Importantly, the concept of mianzi can be

reframed collectively: rather than viewing help-seeking as individual failure, it can be presented as pastoral responsibility and stewardship for effective ministry. When students understand that seeking support enables better service to others, it aligns with cultural values of contribution and mutual care. [8] Seminary leaders can emphasise that maintaining personal well-being is essential for sustainable ministry and responsible leadership.

2. Providing Culturally Responsive Support Pathways

Sue et al. emphasise that "good counselling is culturally responsive counselling," requiring adaptation of intake processes, communication styles, and therapeutic approaches.[9] Seminaries should prioritise bilingual or culturally competent counselling options, clearly signposting these services and establishing referral agreements with trusted Chinese-speaking Christian counselling centres where internal capacity is limited.

The Chinese Theological College Australia (CTCA), for example, partners with Chinese Christian counselling organisations to provide referrals, and the availability of Chinese-speaking counsellors has proven to be a key factor that encourages students to seek help. Chinese faculty, mentors, and field education supervisors serve as invaluable assets in culturally informed gatekeeping - recognising indirect distress signals, somatic presentations, and preferences for informal help.

3. Leveraging Informal Support Preferences

Rather than working against cultural preferences for informal support, seminaries should create structured peer-care systems that align with these values. CTCA offers buddy programs during orientation that pair new students with existing students from similar cultural backgrounds. Weekly prayer meetings promote a sense of family among students, creating natural opportunities for pastoral care and mutual support within culturally familiar frameworks.



As Choe demonstrates in her work on pastoral counselling with Korean Americans, church-integrated support models can provide “third space” approaches that honour cultural values while delivering effective care.[10] These hybrid models reduce stigma by embedding support within familiar religious and cultural contexts.

4. Building Belonging and Safety

Intentional community-building through recreational activities promotes well-being and connectedness within the seminary environment. Yearly retreat camps and end-of-semester gatherings that centre around shared meals and fellowship create warm, casual environments where students can share their experiences naturally. These gatherings serve dual purposes: building community resilience and providing informal assessment opportunities for faculty to identify students who may benefit from additional support.

The emphasis on food and hospitality particularly resonates with Chinese cultural values around care and belonging, making these events effective vehicles for both prevention and early intervention.

5. Curriculum Integration and Formation

Reflective practices within pastoral formation courses – guided journaling, small group

processes, regular check-ins – can create safe disclosure opportunities when coupled with clear opt-in boundaries and referral pathways. CTCA offers its own Certificate in Ministry Training program, allowing students to enrol free of charge while maintaining connections with mentors, faculty, and fellow students. Attending lectures and courses such as Personal Growth and Leadership helps students develop self-awareness and build supportive networks within the seminary community.

Crucially, curriculum must include a robust theology of weakness, vulnerability, and care that validates help-seeking as faithful stewardship rather than spiritual failure. Integration of biblical models of community care, the theology of suffering, and pastoral ethics around self-care can provide theological frameworks that support cultural adaptation to Western counselling approaches while maintaining spiritual integrity.

6. Proactive and Preventive Approaches

The timing of support is a critical factor in helping Chinese students seek help. Proactive outreach around high-stress periods, such as exams, placement transitions, or times of visa and financial strain, is particularly effective. When combined with step-by-step guides and testimonials from respected alumni, this approach

can significantly increase their confidence in accessing support. To further build this trust and familiarity from the outset, new students are introduced to the Dean of Students and the Chaplain as soon as they are admitted.

Conclusion

Supporting Chinese theological students effectively requires more than cultural sensitivity; it demands systemic transformation of how theological institutions conceptualise and deliver pastoral care. The goal is not simply to help Chinese students access existing Western counselling models, but to create genuinely inclusive environments where cultural diversity enhances rather than complicates student formation.

Success in this endeavour benefits not only Chinese students but enriches the entire seminary community. When institutions effectively navigate cultural differences in help-seeking, they model the kind of cross-cultural competence essential for contemporary ministry. Moreover, the community care models that resonate with Chinese cultural values often strengthen pastoral formation for all students by emphasising mutual support, proactive care, and integrated spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

Footnotes:

AI Disclosure: I used several AI tools to polish the language of the article.

- [1] K. Atherton & J. Cornwall "Psychological Distress and Help-seeking Behaviour: Chinese International Students in New Zealand." *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association* 30.1 (2022): 48–62. <https://doi.org/10.30688/janzssa.2022-1-04>
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- [3] L. Huang, M. L. Kern and L. G. Oades, "Strengthening University Student Wellbeing: Language and Perceptions of Chinese International Students," *Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17.15 (2020): 5538. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17155538>.

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- [8] Tang, *Asian American Psychology*, Ch. 5.
- [9] D. W. Sue, et al., *Counselling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*, 9th ed. (Wiley, 2022), 89.
- [10] H.-J. Choe, *Opening the Red Door: Pastoral Counselling for Second-Generation Korean Americans in Third Space* (Pickwick Publications, 2022).

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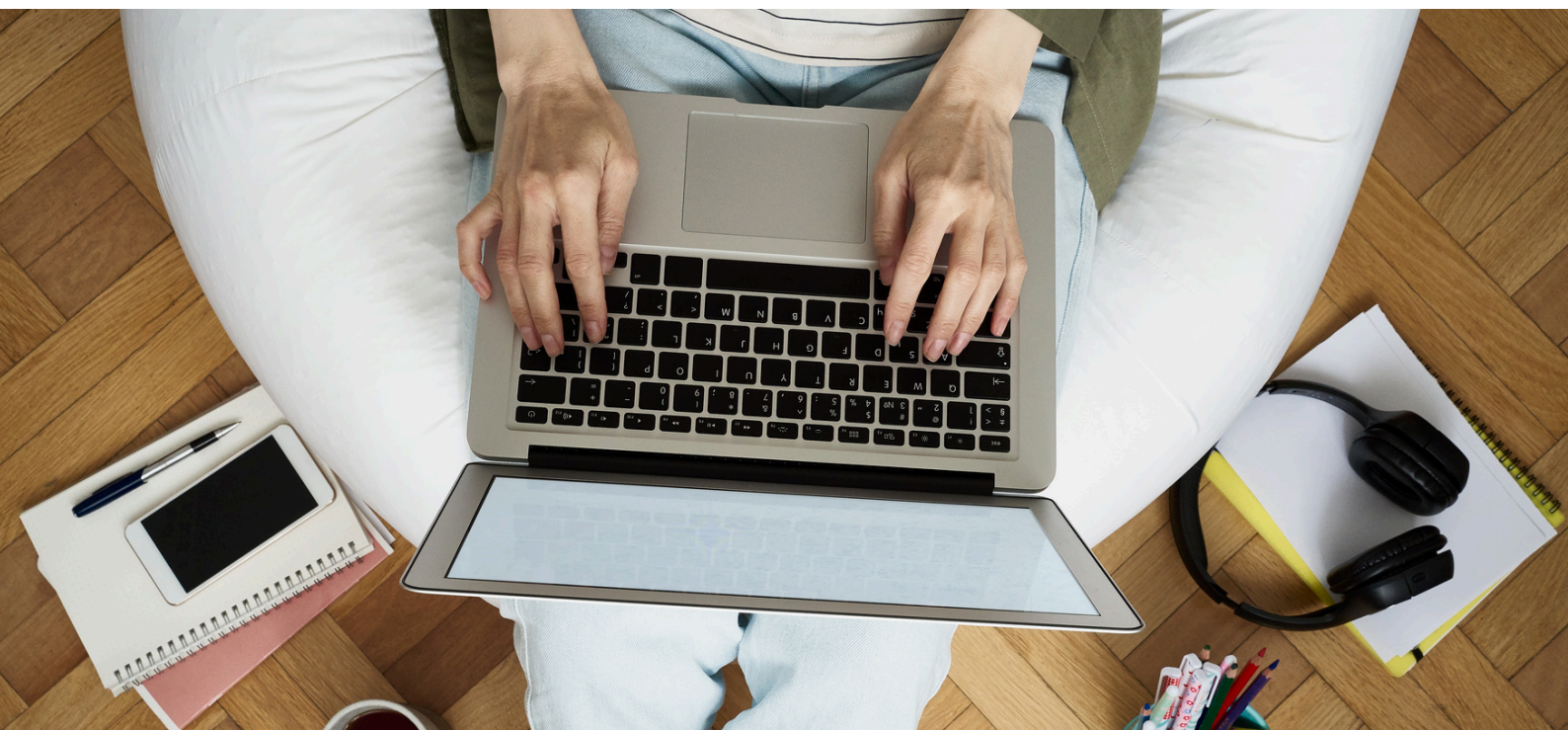
Using Enrolment Data to Anticipate Student Support Needs

Louise Gosbell – Research Manager, AUT Office

I was only 17 years old when I began an arts degree at the University of Western Sydney in the mid-1990s. I was what we would now call ‘first in family’ – that is, a university student whose parents or immediate family have not attained a university degree. But I wasn’t just the first in my immediate family to go to university: I was the first in my entire extended family. In fact, when I started university, I didn’t know anyone who had completed a university degree except for my high school teachers. While everyone assured me I would do well at university, the reality was that I very quickly felt out of my depth. I had done well in high school, especially in English, but I really struggled to understand what was expected of me at university. I didn’t know how to research or write essays or reference in exactly the way my lecturers expected. More than that, I didn’t know who to turn to for help or how to address my knowledge gap. There were certainly no research skills workshops or student support programs like those that exist in universities today. As a result, the transcript from the first year of my degree looks a bit like alphabet soup – there are a few Ps, some Ds, an FW and a range of other acronyms I probably didn’t

understand at the time. By the end of that first year, I really doubted my ability to finish a university qualification.

Only a few weeks into my second year at university, my mum passed away unexpectedly. When I called the administration office at my university to advise them that I might need some extensions on assignments, they suggested it would be better to suspend my studies. They informed me that I needed to come onto campus and have each one of my lecturers sign a form to formally withdraw me from each class. At no time in the process of liaising with the administration staff or speaking with lecturers did anyone ask me about how I was coping or direct me to counselling services or any other support programs. In fact, one lecturer’s response was so harsh that the memory of it is firmly fixed in my mind even all these years later. The university administration informed me that the final lecturer I needed to see to sign off my paperwork was in the middle of a tutorial, but it would be necessary to interrupt him to complete the form. When I knocked on the door, the lecturer beckoned me to his desk at the front of the classroom. He read the paperwork, signed it,



handed it back to me and waved a dismissing hand toward the door, all without speaking to me. On my way out of the classroom, a fellow student leaned over and whispered, “I was so sorry to hear about your mum.” I barely finished my whispered “thanks” in response before the lecturer stood and yelled at me, “How dare you interrupt my class like this! You are no longer a student in this class. Get out!” And with those words, my time with that particular public university came to an end.

Thirty years later, I’m incredibly grateful that Australian higher education providers have made significant progress in developing support services for students. A look at any AUT college website reveals detailed information about study skills assistance, counselling referrals, financial advice, SASH incident reporting, and other support services. Today, educational providers generally work on the assumption that every student will likely require help at some point during their studies, and we aim to make that assistance as straightforward as possible to access.

There is also greater recognition that certain groups face additional barriers to accessing higher education. The Australian government has identified four key equity groups: students from low socio-economic backgrounds, First Nations students, students from regional and remote areas, and students with disability, and has introduced measures to address these barriers.[1] A 2022 Universities Australia report showed significant enrolment increases across all four groups, with students with disability showing a 169% increase over the previous ten years.[2] However, these statistics mask a troubling reality: students from all four equity areas, as well as students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those who are ‘first in family,’ [3] experience higher attrition rates than the general student population. While students from these groups might now have a greater chance to *get in* to higher education, they aren’t necessarily able to *stay in* to complete their qualifications.

In her article in the current issue, Gayle Kent helpfully challenges us to reframe our understanding of academic support services as more than a means of correcting identified “deficits” in individual students (pp. 5–6), but as resources that can benefit all students. She proposes that theological educators need to develop “whole-of-organisation responses to care” not merely for the sake of compliance but because we wish to be Christian organisations undergirded by the “conviction that every person is created in the image of God and worthy of dignity, safety and care” (p. 6). In conjunction with Gayle’s whole-of-organisation approach, I would also suggest that we need to think more intentionally about journeying with students whom we identify from the outset as falling into one or more equity areas to help ensure they don’t end up as another statistic of attrition.

Given my own bumpy start in higher education – as someone who was both ‘first in family’ and from a low socio-economic area – and my research in disability theology, I have become particularly interested in what good support services look like for students in higher education, especially those who fall into categories of disadvantage or vulnerability. Before starting in my current position with the AUT, I worked in a range of roles at Mary Andrews College including as Dean of Students, where I had the opportunity to implement a range of support policies and procedures so that we could be more intentional and proactive in supporting students who might be more vulnerable or face greater barriers to completion of studies than others.

One practical way to implement this proactive, whole-of-organisation approach is through the intentional use of enrolment data. Rather than viewing student data in Paradigm as merely administrative, we began thinking holistically about what applications reveal. Information we typically view in utilitarian terms – a postal address for correspondence or parents’ education levels – can actually



indicate whether a student falls into equity categories associated with higher attrition: regional/remote location, low socio-economic background, or 'first in family' status. Viewed intentionally, this data helps us proactively shape conversations with new students about available supports.

During my time as Dean of Students, we also initiated the use of Student Support Plans (SSPs), also known as Individual Education Plans (IEPs). These types of plans are standard in all levels of education worldwide. However, as I've written about elsewhere,[4] the process of requesting support for students with disability or for students with other support needs is often burdensome to students, with the onus placed on them to initiate the process of seeking support and request specific adjustments. Mary Andrews college now takes a proactive approach: identifying students more susceptible to attrition, initiating early conversations, and working collaboratively to create tailored plans. Rather than asking students to request specific supports, we offered informed suggestions based on our understanding of disability, equity, and past experience. This is particularly valuable for students with a new or dynamic disability (that is, a disability that fluctuates in severity or intensity) who might not yet know what accommodations would be most helpful.

It is important to recognise that simply because a student has a disability does not necessarily mean

that they need academic or any other kind of support. In some cases, some students who identified as having a disability said they didn't feel they needed additional supports. In other cases, students were incredibly grateful that we were proactive in making contact to discuss support options. I always made it clear that we were interested in their disability information, not as a means of gatekeeping or preventing them from coming to study (which we all know would constitute disability discrimination), but so that we could support the student to be successful in their study. When we met, in person or on Zoom, we could discuss the impact of the person's disability and together consider what supports might be best for them. As an example, if a student who is hard of hearing wished to enrol, we might discuss designated seating in the classroom, sending reminders to lecturers to always repeat questions that students ask (it can be difficult for a student with hearing loss to hear questions asked by fellow students if they aren't using a microphone), or other measures to ensure we are creating environments where students with disability have equitable access to education. Students could determine how much personal information was given to lecturers – the lecturer might receive a student's support plan, but not the precise diagnoses a student has if that is what the student preferred – and students were able to update or modify the plan if required.

In my first attempt at university, limited understanding of higher education, combined

with personal challenges and inadequate support systems, prevented me from completing my studies. I became an attrition statistic, but more significantly, I carried a lasting sense of failure for years before attempting higher education again. Attrition represents more than numbers on a spreadsheet; it can profoundly impact students who can internalise a sense of inadequacy through feeling they have ‘failed’ at tertiary study.

This is why proactive identification and support of vulnerable students matters so deeply. When institutions wait for students to seek help, we risk losing students who would most benefit from support. However, when we identify potential barriers early – through intentional engagement with enrolment data, proactive outreach to students who might be part of an equity group, and the implementation of support plans before crisis points – we can intervene meaningfully.

What made the difference when I returned to higher education as a mature-age student was having administrative and academic staff who made themselves available to answer questions and offer guidance; a deep knowledge that college staff were journeying with me and were committed to helping me navigate barriers in my personal context; and a clear sense of whom to ask for help when needed.

May we be administrators and academics who help students feel seen and known, supported and valued, connected and equipped, recognising potential struggles before they become insurmountable, and walking alongside students through challenges rather than waiting for them to ask. This is what it

means to care for students to the glory of God, ensuring they can become graduates, as Gayle argues in her article, who are “formed in Christlikeness and equipped to be God's agents of hope and transformation in the world” (p. 5).

Footnotes:

[1] See, for example, Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES), “Defining Equity Groups Report,” September 2024.

[2] Universities Australia, “Data Snapshot,” July 2022.

[3] A new report published by the Australian Centre for Student Equity & Success suggests that ‘first in family’ should be added to the list of the government’s equity groups: T. Zając, G. Stahl, W. Tomaszewski, and N. Xiang, “Investigating the relationships between First-in-Family status, equity groups, and university access,” October 2025.

[4] Louise Gosbell, “Universal Design for Learning in Christian Higher Education: Inclusive Practices for Students with and Without Disability.” Pages 423–442 in *Innovating Christian Education Research: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Edited by Johannes M. Luetz and Beth Green. Singapore: Springer, 2021.

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Reframing Support as Empowerment: Student-Led Models of Care and Inclusion

Komberoro Tembo – Independent Scholar

In contemporary educational contexts, the concept of support has traditionally been framed as a set of institutional interventions aimed at assisting students perceived as vulnerable or at risk. While these frameworks are well-intentioned, they often position students as passive recipients rather than active agents in shaping their learning and wellbeing. This paradigm, while necessary in certain contexts, risks fostering dependency and reinforces hierarchical structures of authority within educational institutions. Recent scholarship, however, advocates for a shift from support to empowerment, emphasizing models in which students themselves play a central role in designing, leading, and sustaining care and inclusion initiatives. As Gillett-Swan notes, “Student voice should be conceptualized not as tokenistic consultation but as active participation in decision-making processes that affect learning and wellbeing.”[1] By reframing support as empowerment, educational institutions can move from doing for students to doing with them, cultivating agency, leadership skills, and a culture of mutual accountability.

Traditional, top-down approaches to student support often involve professional staff or faculty identifying needs and prescribing interventions. While effective in delivering certain services, these approaches can inadvertently limit students’ sense of autonomy and agency. Empowerment reframes the relationship between students and institutions: rather than simply providing resources, institutions facilitate conditions under which students can identify needs, design solutions, and

implement initiatives collaboratively. Freirean pedagogy underpins much of this thinking, emphasizing that education should be a dialogical process in which learners co-create knowledge rather than passively receiving it. [2] In the context of student support, this means that students are not merely objects of intervention but subjects capable of shaping the policies, programs, and practices that impact them. Matthews and Dollinger echo this sentiment: “While both student representation and student partnership are a means of realizing the aspiration of student voice in higher education, they differ and the difference matters.”[3] Empowerment-based models reorient power dynamics, fostering environments in which students exercise meaningful influence over their learning, wellbeing, and community experiences. This approach also encourages reciprocity: students gain leadership, mentoring, and project management skills, while institutions benefit from innovative solutions that reflect lived experiences.

Student-led models of care represent a practical manifestation of empowerment in higher education. These initiatives encompass peer mentoring networks, mental health ambassador programs, student inclusion committees, and student-run support hubs, all of which shift the dynamic of care from hierarchical service delivery to relational, peer-driven engagement. Evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of these approaches. Le, Sok, and Heng summarize the impact of peer mentoring, noting, “The findings showed that the benefits of peer mentoring in higher education could be categorised into four fundamental aspects,

including academic performance, retention rates, emotional and psychological wellbeing, and social integration.”[4] Similarly, van der Velden et al. found that first-year students participating in peer-mentorship programs reported enhanced feelings of belonging, reduced isolation, and increased confidence navigating institutional systems.[5] These studies suggest that student-led care models provide both practical support and psychosocial benefits, fostering resilience and self-efficacy. The reciprocal nature of student-led care is particularly notable. Mentors benefit from enhanced leadership skills, professional experience, and a sense of purpose, while mentees receive peer-proximal guidance. As Andrews observes, “The majority of studies published involve Higher Education students, where positive outcomes are recorded for both mentors and mentees in terms of academic engagement, confidence, and social integration.”[6]

True inclusion transcends mere representation or token accommodation. Student-led models position learners as co-creators of inclusive educational environments, allowing them to design policies, curricular initiatives, and cultural practices that reflect diverse experiences and needs. Masuku highlights the significance of co-creation: “Students experience and navigate various injustices in their classroom contexts related to economic maldistribution, cultural misrecognition and political misrepresentation.”[7] In this framework, inclusion is not granted to students by institutions but something actively constructed in partnership with them. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a complementary methodology, offering principles to make learning accessible by design. Al-Azawei, Serenelli, and Lundqvist note, “UDL implementation leads to increased accessibility, engagement, and motivation across diverse student populations, particularly for students with disabilities or non-traditional learning needs.”[8] By integrating UDL principles with student-led co-creation, institutions can simultaneously reduce barriers to learning and ensure that inclusion is responsive, contextually relevant, and sustainable.

In student-led frameworks, educators transition from authoritative providers to facilitators of agency. Their role is to create conditions that enable student leadership, provide training and support, and foster structures for decision-making and program evaluation. Gillett-Swan emphasizes the importance of authentic partnership, noting, “Without genuine structural support, student voice initiatives risk being perceived as tokenistic, undermining both student agency and institutional credibility.”[9] Effective empowerment models require institutional commitment, including formal recognition of student roles, mentoring and training for peer leaders, and channels for student input to influence policy and program design. Ngare observes that embedding student leadership in governance structures enhances both engagement and academic outcomes, demonstrating the systemic benefits of empowerment-oriented practice.[10]

Design principles underpinning successful student-led models include training and supervision, formal governance, reciprocity and recognition, universal design anchoring, and rigorous evaluation. Students should hold formal roles in decision-making committees, receive recognition for leadership contributions,[11] and participate in designing programs that adhere to UDL principles.[12] Mixed-method evaluation is critical for continuous improvement, as Guerreiro observes: “The role of peer mentoring programme elements in promoting academic success and preventing dropout in higher education remains a key area of study.”[13]

Institutions adopting student-led, empowerment-focused frameworks report multiple transformative outcomes: increased belonging, enhanced peer networks, improved academic outcomes, and reduction in stigma related to mental health or help-seeking. Le et al. conclude, “Peer mentoring programs not only improve academic outcomes but also foster resilience, social support, and leadership skills among participants, demonstrating the reciprocal nature of empowerment.”[14] Such models extend beyond individual outcomes,

contributing to institutional culture change by embedding principles of collaboration, participation, and inclusivity. Reframing support as empowerment represents a fundamental shift in higher education practice. Student-led models of care and inclusion position learners as co-creators, leaders, and agents of change, rather than passive recipients of care. By integrating peer-led mentorship, co-creation processes, and universal design principles, institutions can cultivate sustainable, inclusive communities that foster both academic success and holistic wellbeing. The challenge for educators and policymakers is practical: creating infrastructure, governance, training, and evaluation mechanisms that embed student leadership in institutional practice. By doing so, universities do not simply support students – they empower them to lead inclusive, innovative, and just educational futures.

Footnotes:

- [1] J. Gillett-Swan, “Student Voice and Teacher Voice in Educational Research: A 25-Year Synthesis.” *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 47.5 (2024): 607–625, here 614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2257132>.
- [2] P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary Edition (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).
- [3] K. E. Matthews, & M. Dollinger, “Student Voice in Higher Education: Distinguishing student representation and student partnership.” *Studies in Higher Education* 47.3 (2022): 563–577, here 564. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00851-7>.
- [4] H. G. Le, S. Sok, & T. Heng, “The Benefits of Peer Mentoring in Higher Education: Findings from a Systematic Review.” *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* 18.1 (2024): 1–12, here 2. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi31.1159>.
- [5] G. J. van der Velden, J. A. Meeuwsen, C. M. Fox, C. Stolte, & G. Dilaver, “Peer-Mentorship and First-Year Inclusion: Building Belonging in Higher Education.” *BMC Medical Education* 23.1 (2023): 833. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-023-04805-0>.
- [6] J. Andrews, *Peer Mentoring in Higher Education:*

Literature Review and Evaluation (Aston University Publications, 2009), 4.

- [7] M. Masuku, “Student Co-Creation and Inclusion in Higher Education: Experiences and Challenges.” *Social Sciences* 13.7 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14010006>.
- [8] A. Al-Azawei, F. Serenelli, & K. Lundqvist, “Universal Design for Learning (UDL): A Content Analysis of Peer-Reviewed Journal Papers from 2012 to 2015.” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 16.3 (2016): 39–62, here 44. doi: [10.14434/josotl.v16i3.19295](https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v16i3.19295).
- [9] Gillett-Swan, “Student Voice and Teacher Voice,” 619.
- [10] E. Ngare, “Embedding Student Leadership in Higher Education Governance.” *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 44.6 (2022): 585–599. <https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2022.1.102024139>.
- [11] S. Peplow, L. Plath, T. Chaloner, S. Inchley, S. Reece, & A. Singhai, “Accountable and Empowered: Professionalising Student Voice.” *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* 7.1 (2024): 131–138. <https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1410>.
- [12] Al-Azawei et al., “Universal Design for Learning (UDL).”
- [13] T. Guerreiro, “Peer Mentoring Programme Elements in Higher Education: Evaluating Academic Success and Retention.” *Studies in Higher Education* 50.2 (2025): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2025.2484768>.
- [14] Le et al., “The Benefits of Peer Mentoring in Higher Education,” 3.

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Supporting Students with ADHD in Theological Education

Erin Hutton (AUT Office) & Caitlin Olsen (AUT Graduate & Tutor)

Caitlin, an academic tutor at Morling, has recently finished her Masters with AUT, and has also recently received an ADHD diagnosis.

Erin, in Learning & Teaching at the AUT, has known ADHD runs in her family for, oh forever, but was officially diagnosed five years ago.

We Zoomed to discuss co-writing this article. During our characteristically ADHD free-form-jazz-conversation, we decided to make the medium the message. The following writing reconstructs our meeting. We added sub-headings for clarity and edited sections to fit the word count. However, it's still replete with the requisite tangents, metaphors, and mild chaos of two neurodivergent brains in dialogue. We have real questions, experiences, frustrations, and hopes for others like us.

Caitlin: My diagnosis is relatively fresh – I'm still figuring out what that means for me with tertiary education. I have a burning question: If you could go back to when you were first diagnosed, what would you tell yourself?

Erin: I'd say: "No, Erin, that's not your unique personality, that's ADHD!" For example, when I saw that meme, "my brain has too many tabs open..." my first thought was: "Yes, I can also lag like Internet Explorer, programs stop responding, and error 404: file not found." My second thought was remembering that I can learn hacks, tips, and tricks from other ADHDers.

Caitlin: I get it. It feels like I always reach for multiple forms of mental stimulation at once: scrolling memes, watching YouTube, trying to read an article, replying to messages in fragments of song lyrics...

Erin: Exactly! It's like we got the same cognitive firmware update, but I digress. And I should get back to why we're Zooming: ADHD and pedagogy. Our pedagogical practices are where and how we enact what we believe about how students learn (in other words, our pedagogical philosophy). For me, and I assume it's the same for you, that's informed by how we learned (and continue to learn).



Reasonable Adjustments

Caitlin: Absolutely. It's the same for me. When I was doing my Masters, I didn't know I had ADHD, even though I knew I had similar symptoms. In preparation for my thesis, in my Research Methods unit, I made a learning plan, and as part of it, I included things I already knew would help: I used study partners and timers to make sure I stayed focused. And I asked my supervisor to give me (additional) deadlines, so it actually meant something if I didn't meet them.

Erin: So, all of those things are reasonable adjustments. And I can completely relate! For my PhD, I knew that if I didn't have deadlines throughout my candidature, I'd spend all my time (over)thinking and then madly writing in a panic-induced, caffeine-fuelled haze right before I was due to submit. I did thesis-by-publication instead, and that effectively broke the dissertation down into (timely) chunks.

Caitlin: Maybe I need to look into that for my PhD! Okay, so who's responsible for reasonable adjustments? How much should we expect ADHD students to know what they need for their own brains?

Erin: Looking after reasonable adjustments is part of my job, but experience tells me they aren't well understood. Basically, students might not have had the opportunity to work out how they learn best. And they're unlikely to know what's within the realm of possibility for adjustments. Likewise, lecturers might also be unfamiliar with reasonable adjustments. Louise Gosbell and I are creating resources for common reasonable adjustments. That way, the onus isn't on the student to come up with workarounds, and anyone supporting students can be equipped to make reasonable adjustments. Having said that, a "checklist" of adjustments is a bit of a band-aid solution. We can do more than that.

Caitlin: What else could we be doing, or what's some general advice, or good practices for ADHD students and their lecturers?

Clear Communication

Erin: In 2023, AUT ran the Being and Belonging: Disability, Church, and Community conference and, as I was writing my paper, I realised much of what is considered reasonable adjustments for ADHDers is actually good practice for everyone.

Caitlin: Is this where we go off on a tangent about Universal Design for Learning?

Erin: I'm always ready to get up on my UDL soapbox, but you can introduce the "Kerb Cut Effect." For now, I'll say that inclusive practices don't just start with assessments; they begin before a student enters a (virtual) classroom.

Caitlin: When I think of UDL, I always think of the Kerb Cut. It's the part in the pavement where the concrete smoothly dips down to meet the road. It was originally developed to help wheelchair users cross a road, but it has proven helpful for cyclists, parents pushing prams, or anyone looking for the safest place to cross. An adjustment made for one group inadvertently benefited many groups. Our learning design can do the same thing, if we're smart about it.

Erin: I wholeheartedly agree! In thinking through supporting ADHD students, we'll likely help plenty of other students along the way. One thing to consider is how we communicate.

Caitlin: Yeah, I think communication is key for inclusive practices. I spend a lot of time thinking about what would make me feel supported by staff, and how other students might understand things differently from me. I try to communicate in a few different ways, and in ways that invite feedback.

Erin: Yep, one example is giving clear, detailed information about, say, the unit structure, assessment expectations, and deadlines in multiple formats (especially written, particularly after meetings), ensuring students have accurate records. But don't forget to give students a chance to respond and "close the feedback loop."



“The Kerb Cut Effect”

Caitlin: I second making sure there is both verbal and written communication – giving students something to return to in writing, and getting it directly in front of their faces. The anxiety experienced by ADHD students when instructions are not clear might not be visible, and students might feel as if they cannot ask for clarification. Encouraging and empowering students to communicate back to their lecturer what they aim to achieve, not only cultivates trust, and is essential for clarity with ADHD brains perceiving multiple meanings, it’s also simply good practice for all students.

Erin: I think a part of this worth homing in on is having clear parameters for what is and isn’t in scope for any given learning activity or assessment task.

Caitlin: I’ve definitely experienced – for myself and students I’ve tutored – when there are too many ways something can be construed, resulting in overwhelm, or shutdown, and throwing the whole thing in the too-hard basket. Clear boundaries allow the ADHD brain’s characteristic ability to connect ideas quickly-yet-meaningfully to flourish within the bounds of the task, and ultimately results in better scholarship.

Tools to Help

Erin: I’ve found that I can do “hard” things, but I can’t do “easy” things. Can I complete a PhD? Yes. Can I complete a timesheet? No. Can I

decide to move to Ecuador? Yes. Do I know what I want for dinner? Absolutely not. Deciding what to eat every day for the rest of my life? Zero stars. Would not recommend.

Caitlin: Reasons I do “girl dinner” so often. The “goblin-brain” cannot seem to settle on one meal idea for long enough to actually make it. Which sometimes looks like a Gollum-esque handful of shredded cheese, crouched in front of an open fridge.

Erin: That reminds me, have you used Goblin Tools?

Caitlin: No, but I’ve been around ADHD vernacular long enough to guess that whoever made that tool understands the assignment.

Erin: 100%! Goblin Tools were created by neurodivergent people to help when things are overwhelming or complicated. Some of my favourite tools are The Chef, which can help with those dinner decisions, and The Formaliser which can adjust emails for tone.

Caitlin: Our brains are chaotic enough, so anything that removes some of that “noise” sounds amazing! ADHD brains move very quickly, but don’t have the same “shortcuts” as more neurotypical brains. So, we spend more energy building ourselves shortcuts, or finding ways to let other people or tools do that for us.

Erin: What tools or practices would you

recommend for ADHD students and lecturers?

Caitlin: Here's a brain-dump (another characteristically ADHD thing) of some things that've worked for me or my students:

- The Pomodoro Method - a "round in the ring" with your fearsome assignment, expecting no more than 25 minutes of focused work. Kill time blindness in the face.
- Beating the Blank Page - just get something down, even if it's a copy-paste of the assignment question.
- Double input - reading and using Speechify, for instance.
- Make a to-do list. A short one. No more than 5 things.
- Make a schedule that plays to your strengths - not just, say, 8-hour blocks of work, but actually including time for bilateral movement.

These are more student-directed strategies. What about lecturers?

What Lecturers Can Do

Erin: Louise and I Zoomed with Courtney Patten - she teaches OT and is already doing excellent, creative things in the classroom - to discuss exactly this.

Caitlin: Let me guess, things like:

- Creating space for sensory stimulation - bringing in crochet or fiddle toys, providing movement breaks, or expecting that some students might need to chew gum or have a cuppa with them in class.
- Breaking down tacit expectations within the classroom architecture - using colouring sheets, sitting on a stool, moving the desks around...

Erin: Exactly! And:

- Representing information in multiple ways - audiovisual resources, graphs, memes, and different ways of engaging with the content.

- Giving students choice in their learning activities and assessments (where appropriate).
- Repeating important information.

Caitlin: Repeating important information (you know, just to obviously labour the point).

How (Not) to Burn Out

Erin: Speaking of repeating, I've learnt (the hard way) I don't recognise burnout until it's too late. It's not only that ADHDers tend to take on too much, it's also that there's so much we can't control. I've had to work on addressing what I can control.

Caitlin: And not confusing the two. I'm learning that "no" is not an evil thing to say. I often don't clock when I am outputting a bunch of energy, particularly in social situations, until much later. Then I wonder why I'm exhausted!

Erin: Oh, same. I'm tired and wired at the end of the day. Routine helps, but - to bring it back to Gollum - "we hates it!"

Caitlin: Yeah, establishing a regular routine - one that works for me - reduces the amount of stuff I need to think through just to get through the day; I can put so much more on autopilot. I think we all need balance between work and rest in the short-term, and regular, sustainable rhythms over the long-term.

Erin: Agreed... but "time-blindness" can throw a spanner in the works.

Caitlin: Yeah, time-blindness is a common ADHD experience. It's genuinely not knowing how long things are going to take. Replying to an email could take 5 minutes... but, in my head, it'll take so long that I struggle to even get started. Or, if I have a whole 8-hour block to study and one other thing to do, I might not get it done because I have no idea how to fit those two things together.

Erin: For me, time-blindness means I lose track of time while hyper-focused *and* I have little-to-no concept of linear time. So, I find it difficult to establish those long-term rhythms, and to work out if I've overcommitted, unless I'm actively looking at everything displayed on a calendar!

Caitlin: I learned pretty quickly, as a student, to limit time spent on assignment preparation. I needed to work smart, not long, so I developed a routine-for-completing-assignments, which began with creating a thorough plan. This meant I didn't have to spend energy navigating every assignment from scratch; the process became automatic, which gave me more space to think about the content rather than the method.

Erin: Similarly, I realised that my environment had to be conducive to study. I'd enclose myself in a small space, limit (visual) distractions, put headphones on, and "nest", meaning everything I'd need (books, snacks, drinks, pencils, etc.) was within reach. I love that how we "hack" our respective brains looks totally different.

Caitlin: One of my favourite parts of tutoring is making these kinds of shortcuts accessible to students and helping them figure out which

strategies are best for them, because if you've met one ADHDer, you've met one ADHDer. What matters, I think even theologically, isn't one-size-fits-most supports, but inclusive practices that allow all students to thrive in their purpose of knowing God better.

Links to some helpful resources:

- [ADCET Website](#) (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training)
- [Goblin Tools](#)
- Louise Gosbell and Erin Hutton, "[Belonging for Students with Disability in Theological Education](#)." *Stimulus* 32:1 (2025).
- Erin Hutton, "[ADHD and Reasonable Adjustments in Theological Education](#)." *Stimulus* 32:1 (2025).
- [UDL on Campus](#)
- Maja Whitaker (Laidlaw College, NZ), "['I felt like I was being pushed into a box I have escaped': ADHD and the Rule of Life in Education for Spiritual Formation](#)."

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Upcoming Events

Have an event coming up you'd like promoted in the AUT newsletter?
Let us know by emailing the details and links to research@aut.edu.au

2026

FEBRUARY

11-13 February: Wesley Centre (Melbourne) - “Theology and Culture Conference on Gendered Violence.” Conference location: Pilgrim Theological College, 29 College Crescent, Parkville. In-person | Early bird rate - \$220 (full cost \$250), Students - \$180.

25 February: Sydney Missionary and Bible College - “Reel Theology: Evangelism, Preaching, and Film” with Dr Kutter Callaway. 9:00am-2pm | In-person & online | \$45 - in-person, \$25 online.

26 February: Anglican Deaconess Ministries/Mary Andrews College (Sydney) - Public Lecture with Dr Jennifer Powell McNutt. 7:30pm-9:00pm.

Looking ahead...

November 2026

The Association for Reflective Practice in Theological Education (ARPTE) will host its 2026 Biennial Conference from 16–18 November at the stunning Vaughan Park Retreat and Conference Centre in Auckland, New Zealand. This ecumenical, trans-Tasman gathering brings together reflective practitioners across theological field education, supervision, chaplaincy and ministry practice of all kinds.

Further details and registration information will be released soon. <https://www.arpte.org/>



Calls for Papers

Call for Papers for a webinar on Christian Nationalism and the Australian Church hosted by the University of Divinity

Webinar date: Friday 10th April, 2026

Christian nationalism in the United States is influencing congregations in Australia. How should theologians and church leaders lead in light of this and how will this ideology affect the future of the church in Australia? How do leaders communicate in God's way of peace and welcome of all, and when is it appropriate to speak out against harmful ideologies? What lessons can we learn from history regarding the current situation?

Papers are invited from the disciplines of history, biblical and theological studies, practical theology, missiology, and spirituality. Clergy are welcome to present. Presenters may be invited to submit their paper as a book chapter for publication.

Abstracts of no more than 250 words should be sent to Dr Sue Holdsworth by January 20, 2026. Email: sue.holdsworth@divinity.edu.au.

Call for Papers for 2026 Spring Issue of Eastern European Journal of Theology “Hermeneutics of Ethical Life: Christian Responsibility During a Crisis”

Theological Reflections: Eastern European Journal of Theology invites researchers to submit scholarly articles for publication in the spring 2026 issue (24:1) titled “Hermeneutics of Ethical Life: Christian Responsibility During a Crisis.” The spring issue will focus on the core principles of church doctrine, Christian ethical values, and the role of believers during socio-political upheavals. In this context, it is important to explore how church teachings have shaped understandings of crises and how these crises have prompted a reevaluation of those teachings, leading to the renewal of traditional principles and practices.

The submission deadline is February 15, 2026. The publication date is May 15, 2026.

To submit an article or review, please upload it to the journal's website at <http://reflections.eeit-edu.info/about/submissions>. Recommendations for authors can be found at <http://reflections.eeit-edu.info/guidelines>. If you have any additional questions or suggestions, don't hesitate to contact us by email at reflections@eeit-edu.info.

Recent Events 2025



Photos from **Mary Andrews College** recent “Theology After Dark” event. Left: Becki Phillips (MAC Dean of Education), MAC graduate Joanna, Di Morgan (MAC lecturer). Right: Amy Yeung (MAC lecturer).



Photos from the recent visit of **Sinclair Ferguson** from Ligonier Ministries to the Presbyterian Theological College (Victoria). Left: Sinclair Ferguson speaking to Pastors at PTC. Right: John Lee (PTC Postgraduate Dean), Sinclair Ferguson, Jared Hood (PTC principal), Nathan Bingham (VP of Media for Ligonier Ministries), Andrew Courtis (Pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church), Ben Nelson (PTC Academic Dean) and John Wilson (PTC faculty).

Recent Events 2025



Attendees at the recent Asia-Pacific Early Christian Studies Society (APECSS) annual conference in Sydney, co-hosted by the University of Notre Dame and the Australian University of Theology. This year's theme was Scripture in Early Christianity.



Attendees at SMBC's "Navigating Change: Strengthening Intergenerational Relationships and Mission in US Immigrant Churches" event on 6th November with speakers Dr Peter Cha (Thriving Immigrant Congregations), Ps. Emeritus Paul Kim (Open Door Presbyterian Church, Virginia, US), & Dr David Ng (Lausanne Global Network).

AUT HDR Conferrals

June - October 2025

Doctor of Philosophy

Catherine Blake
Ridley College

“Seeking the Father in the Crucified Son. A Study on the Trinity and the Atonement through the Lens of the Johannine Mutual Indwelling Motif and Temple Symbolism”

Principal Supervisor: Dr Michael Bird
Co-supervisor: Dr Christopher Porter

Does Jesus die, Fatherless? This thesis reframes the story of the atonement within the eternal Father–Son relation, exploring the Johannine indwelling motif in order to challenge the hermeneutics of alienation, enmity, and abandonment, as exemplified in Penal Substitutionary Atonement’s portrait of the Father. Reinstating John’s voice in the atonement conversation, it traces how he employs Tabernacle–Temple–House symbolism to characterise Trinitarian mutual indwelling, demonstrating that the crucifixion is not an interruption in Trinitarian oneness but rather the enfleshed enactment of their oneness. It calls for a renewed portrait of the Passionate Father, fortified in his commitment to, and dwelling in, his crucified Son.

David Brown
Bible College of South Australia

“Gathering the Family: Inter-Generational Metaphor and Community Formation in Paul and Seneca”

Principal Supervisor: Dr Tim Patrick
Co-supervisor: Dr Jason Maston

Familial metaphors are ubiquitous in texts addressing the formation and organisation of complex social communities, spanning the

millennia of human history and the breadth of human cultures. This thesis examines “inter-generational” metaphors in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians and Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales* and *De Beneficiis*. Each instance of inter-generational metaphor is interpreted using a structured cognitive linguistic approach, applying a modified form of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory. Having assessed each author’s metaphors in turn, the thesis brings the two together in comparative dialogue to explore their conceptions of community through the lens of family. Paul and Seneca are assessed within the categories of divine parenthood, group belonging and behaviour, emotive intent and their approach to authority within the group. The comparative approach identifies some similarities, but more significant differences in how Paul and Seneca desired the communities they addressed to function, and the prominence of metaphorical familial roles in ensuring the perpetuation of group identities.

Aidan Luke
Morling College

“Finding Joy: Human and Divine Joy in Luke’s Parables of the Lost”

Principal Supervisor: Dr David Starling
Co-supervisor: Dr Tim MacBride

Joy is central to the Christian life but has not always been well understood, and the nature of joy (both human and divine) has been a topic of recurring debate among philosophers and theologians. Drawing on ancient and modern accounts of emotion, this thesis argues that Luke commends a joy that is grounded in good reasons, may be subject to a degree of voluntary control, possesses value as part of the moral life, may be expressed by embodied beings, and may be attributed to a divine being who is perfectly

wise, free, good and incorporeal. In the Parables of the Lost, Luke encourages us to believe that if we share in the joy of the shepherd, woman and father, we are sharing in the joy of the God who seeks and saves the lost.

Thomas Messick
Melbourne School of Theology

“The Continuity and Discontinuity of Said Nursi’s Influence upon Fethullah Gülen’s Theological Response to Tyranny”

Principal Supervisor: Dr Peter Riddell
Co-supervisor: Dr Judith Rood

This dissertation explores the relationship between Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960) and Muhammed Fethullah Gülen (1941-2024). Few scholarly works have examined the connection between Gülen and Nursi’s beliefs and practices, and none have explored how Nursi has influenced Gülen’s understanding of tyranny. The research analyzes a set of Gülen’s sermons preached leading up to and following the 2016 coup attempt that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (b.1954) blamed on Gülen and his followers. The dissertation argues that Nursi is the primary intellectual source of Gülen’s teachings and responses to tyranny in his sermons, and that Gülen understands his experiences of tyranny, particularly those stemming from the coup attempt, through the lens of Nursi. Put simply, a scholar who researches Gülen cannot bypass Nursi’s influence on Gülen’s thinking. This research offers a small glimpse into Gülen’s type of Sufi-oriented Islam, which competes with Erdoğan’s Salafi oriented Islam; both of which propose different paths for Türkiye’s future.

Nathan Runham
Presbyterian Theological College – Vic

“On Becoming a Theologian of the Cross: Revisiting Luther’s theologus crucis from Heidelberg to Genesis, for today”

Principal Supervisor: Dr Michael Bräutigam
Co-Supervisor: Dr Rowland Ward

This thesis investigates Martin Luther’s *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) and whether he maintained this theology in his later years. This addresses a twentieth-century scholarly debate: some argue the theology of the cross permeates Luther’s entire theology, while others claim it represents only his earlier, pre-reformational thought. Additionally, confusion exists about what Luther’s theology of the cross actually is, leading to misunderstandings and misapplications. This thesis first surveys representative proponents, opponents, and appropriations of this debate. It then revisits the Heidelberg Disputation (1518) to clarify Luther’s original meaning, finding that his theology of the cross combated pelagianized scholastic theology that had distorted the gospel. Finally, examining Luther’s Lectures on Genesis (1535–1545) reveals that while Luther’s use of the phrase diminished in the mid-1530s, the anti-Pelagian and anti-Aristotelian substance continued, directing Christians toward God’s grace exemplified in Christ’s cross.

James Snare
Christ College

“Union with Christ in Creation and Salvation”

Principal Supervisor: Dr John McClean
Co-supervisor: Dr Devin Yu

This thesis examines whether the language of being ‘in Christ’ and the associated doctrine of union with Christ can be used outside the doctrine of salvation. This thesis concludes that union with Christ language can be used to describe humanity’s relationship to Christ generally, as well as the more traditionally understood specific sense that applies to believers alone. There is a union with Christ in creation between Christ and all people that through faith is progressed to a related but distinct union with Christ unto salvation that is between Christ and the elect alone. This conclusion is reached after surveying the Reformed tradition’s and biblical

studies' teaching on union with Christ, and via the positive construction of a biblical and theologically derived definition of union with Christ in creation.

Diana Summers
Melbourne School of Theology

*"Why Did Muhammad Marry So Many Wives?
What Muslims are Told and What the Sirah
Records"*

Principal Supervisor: Dr Richard Shumack
Co-Supervisor: Dr Bernie Power

The earliest histories report that Muḥammad, the founder of Islam, had at least 26 wives and concubines. Literature by modern Muslims explains that these multiple marriages were motivated by a variety of social or political concerns. This thesis, by making a new synthesis of the earliest historical material, argues that those standard explanations are inadequate. There is very little evidence that Muḥammad's marriages were politically useful. There is significant evidence against the claim that he was acting out of a merciful concern for sheltering poor widows. Nor is there much support for the alternative theories that he wished to train female teachers to educate the community or that he hoped to have children. Rather, the witness of the sirah is that far greater weight should be placed on personal factors such

as disposition and beauty, with Muḥammad's obvious preference for beautiful women emerging as the most important element in his marital choices.

Doctor of Ministry

Craig Corkill
Ridley College

*"From Discovery to Discipleship: How Discovery
Bible Method Leads to Faith at Crossway Baptist
Church"*

Principal Supervisor: Dr Graham Stanton
Co-Supervisor: Dr Richard Trist

Sixty years of research suggests that the vast majority of people in Australia come to faith before the age of 18 years. However, when adopting the evangelism model known as 'Discovery Bible Method,' Crossway Baptist Church have witnessed a sustained growth not only in larger numbers of people coming to faith, but notably a higher proportion being adults. Using Realistic Evaluation Methodology, this study explores the experience of Crossway Baptist Church through a consideration of the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes associated with Discovery Bible Method. As a result of this exploration, recommendations are made to Crossway and the wider Australian church for enhanced evangelistic effectiveness.

Stimulus Issue on Disability



In September 2023, the then Australian College of Theology (ACT) held the "Being and Belonging: Disability, Church and Community" conference at Mary Andrews College in Sydney. Organised by the ACT's Disability Reference Group, the conference brought together academics, practitioners, educators, students, and others to explore disability in relation to community, church, theology, education, and scripture. This month, Laidlaw College's *Stimulus* journal has released an issue dedicated to the conference. You can read those articles free online at the following link: [**Being and Belonging Stimulus**](#).

Attention all AUT Faculty & HDR students

It's not too late to register for the
AUT PD & HDR Conferences this week!
27th-28th November, 2025



To see the full program, visit the 'Events' section of
the [AUT website](#).

To register for the PD conference, click [here](#).
To register for the HDR conference, click [here](#).

Please direct any enquiries about either conference to
research@aut.edu.au

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AUT Office News

The AUT Office will close at 12pm on Tuesday 23rd December and re-open on Monday 5th January, 2026.

NEXUS Communications

For any communications regarding the AUT's NEXUS magazine, please contact us at:

research@aut.edu.au