The experiences of an online academic advising approach supporting adult learners transition into an enabling program preparing them for university

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Online modes of study are increasingly prevalent in higher education, including university-enabling programs. As student cohorts diversify, access to individualised and holistic support strategies is increasingly important for students to expeditiously transition into higher education. On-campus provision of academic advising, while an effective transition support strategy, potentially disadvantages online students. This study explores the design and evaluation of online academic advising to support adult learners' transition into a regional Australian university enabling program. Quantitative and qualitative data was analysed from 199 survey responses of student experience of engaging with online academic advising. Participants agreed online academic advising had benefits and was useful. Findings included online academic advising provides adult learners support with

*enrolment, access to relevant and timely information, and development
of their student identity and sense of belonging. A transitional typology
was used to critically review online academic advising and a method to
evaluate the success of the transition.*

Keywords: *online academic advising, enabling, university
preparation programs, transition, sense of belonging, connectedness*

Introduction

Higher education institutions offering enabling education have
experienced increased numbers of students enrolling over the last
decade into their enabling programs (McKay et al., 2018). Student
numbers and diversity have increased and there is a need to better
understand the transition experiences of adult learners and consider
improved and nuanced approaches to introduce and orient students into
commencing university-enabling pathway programs (higher education
study). Transition as a concept and an experience is a critical element
for effective change and success from school to university, university to
work and it also applies to considering higher education study inclusive
of enabling programs (Lisciandro, 2022; Taylor & Harris-Evans,
2018). Articulation and retention are key drivers and determinants
of success and are of interest to students and the university. This
increase in student numbers is being sustained by the offering of online
modes of study (Shah et al., 2014). Stone (2017) and Diep et al. (2019)
concur and highlight the opportunity yet realise the need to critically
consider the design and support of online learning and support of adult
learners. Online academic advising can support students' transition
into higher education, enhancing their preparation and empowering
them in their studies, and reducing attrition while increasing retention
(Rimbau-Gilbert et al., 2011). This study is from a university that was
experiencing a high volume of students, many from underrepresented
groups and the majority were studying online. Academic advisors were
established to design and implement an innovative and sustainable
financially viable online solution to transition students into the pathway
program and prepare and empower them for undergraduate study.
This study investigates engagement with online academic advising by
adult learners to transition into an enabling program and facilitates an

evaluation of the design and implementation.

Enabling programs

Access to higher education through enabling programs has been increasing for over a decade (McKay et al., 2018). Enabling (university or pathway education) is a growing segment within the higher education sector. Enabling programs contribute to widening university participation. Enabling programs are non-award courses that offer an alternate pathway into university and prepare adult learners for success in their undergraduate degrees with foundational academic skills and capabilities (National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, (NAEEA) 2023; Syme et al., 2022). As cited by Davis et al., (2023) in a benchmarking report "there are 48 enabling programs across Australia" responsible for" enrolling 32,579 students in 2020" (Department of Education, 2022)"(p.6). Enabling education adopts a strengths-based approach (Crank, 2023) as enabling students brings diversity into educational settings and offers "valuable skills and experiences that benefit them, their peers and their tutors by enriching the learning process" (Klinger & Murray, 2011, p. 19). Despite these strengths, effective transitions into higher education are particularly significant for many of these students, who may have experienced long absences from formal education or have complex and disrupted educational experiences. Enabling programs seeks to address inequity in higher education by offering alternative pathways into university for students unable to enter through matriculation from high school to university. Students enrolling in enabling programs "are often of mature age, from vocational pathways, from low-socioeconomic, Indigenous, disabled, rural, regional or non- English speaking backgrounds, and often the first in their family to attend university, and can often be online or part-time working students and parents" (Davis & Green, 2023, p.287). Commonly, enabling programs have high attrition rates (Bookallil & Harreveld, 2017; Vherastidtham & Norton, 2018) and academic advising can play a valuable role in supporting students transitioning into university studies, preparing them for future academic success and positively impacting retention (Dollinger et al., 2021).

Implications and change to the learning environment

The massification of higher education has increased participation

in higher education and the movement to more open and inclusive enrolment policies and resulted in increases in both student numbers and diversity. Enabling programs are designed for students from a wide range of equity groups and underrepresented cohorts. Enabling programs have proven to be successful for equity groups and non-traditional students and if they continue into higher education they can perform at a higher academic level, have higher satisfaction levels and have persisted more in studies when compared to the traditional high school matriculated students (Baker et al., 2020; Jarvis, 2021; Pitman, 2016). The increase in student diversity, and the accompanying increase in the variety of student strengths and needs, calls for a more nuanced approach to adult education to be considered (Thomas et al., 2021; Weiler, 2020). Institutions need to adopt a multi-faceted, proactive, holistic approach to managing student transition into learning and understand the initial and evolving needs of the learners (Heagney & Benson, 2018; Lisciandro, 2022). Stone and O'Shea (2019) further alert practitioners and administrators to the multiplicity of diversity and the significance of staying connected with students as they adjust to the university learning environment. Connectedness improves student confidence, academic performance, and retention (Jones et al., 2019; Pritchard et al., 2018). "Positive student staff relationships are critical to mature age student engagement in learning" and this supports student confidence and retention, and fosters a sense of belonging, and can strengthen commitment to the university" (Cuility, 2006, p. 254). Students also need to have realistic expectations and support so that they can take control of personal challenges and develop agency (Pitman et al., 2016; Zepke, 2018).

Online learning environments support equity by enabling student participation regardless of proximity to a higher education institution and/or personal situational demands, "who would otherwise be excluded through a diverse range of circumstances, including disadvantage due to disability, remoteness, work and/or caring responsibilities" (Dodo-Balu, 2018, p. 33). However, research highlights that online students encounter greater barriers to study than their on-campus peers, including feelings of isolation and being disconnected from the physical presence of peers and their academics (Coman et al., 2020). These barriers are further exacerbated for the non-traditional students, overrepresented in the online cohort. Although enabling

education can provide opportunities for higher education to wider and more diverse cohorts, Engstrom and Tinto (2008) state that access without support is not an opportunity and Tinto (2006) and Lizzio (2006) argue that institutional support should be holistic and require efforts of both academic and administrative staff. Transitioning students into higher education can be achieved by implementing academic advising which usually involves investigating the needs of the student/ individual, considering the 'how to help' and providing the information pertaining to the new environment of systems and procedures. Adult learners particularly benefit from guidance and support in making the necessary academic, cultural, and organisational adjustments to smoothly transition into the university environment and successfully engage with their studies (Powers & Waratalski, 2021).

Transition

Transition is complex, encompassing concepts of induction into university culture and practices; and student development of a sense of belonging and identity. Successful transitions are crucial for adult learners commencing studies after absences from formal education, inevitably from non-traditional students. "Successfully managing the process of transition into university involves acknowledging that students in all their diversity come to us to learn and that we are responsible not just to keep them, but for creating environments where active learning can take place" (Kift & Nelson, 2005, p.225). Transition into higher education is complex from an individual perspective and because universities choose different approaches to support their students, however, it is acknowledged that transitions into higher education are challenging for both traditional and non-traditional students (Kahu et al., 2022; Kift et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2021). Early experiences of transition into university are a crucial component of the student's first-year experience (FYE) (Baik et al., 2019) as negative transition experiences can create uncertainty and low levels of confidence for the commencing students (Goodchild, 2019). A further hurdle to transition can be enrolment. Zaytsev (2011) highlights the importance of students making appropriate enrolment decisions, as enrolment decisions impact confidence and ability to succeed (Lawrence et al., 2019). Student retention and completion can be supported by a range of transition practices, including pre-enrolment information

and preparation, and projects aimed at orientating and transitioning during the start of study, as well as increasing a sense of belonging and recognising and supporting diversity (TEQSA, 2020). The traditional view of student transition is through a lens of induction, or intervention, that prepares incoming students for success in higher education. Such approaches posit transition as a linear movement through phases, such as preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilisation (Coertjens et al., 2017, citing Nicholson's (1990) transition cycle). These concepts of transition tend to privilege academic knowledge and cultures of the respective higher education institutions, and accept these as uncontested and unexamined (Taylor & Harris-Evan, 2018), potentially positioning students as external and deficient (Gravett & Winstone, 2019). More student-centred approaches to transition consider the transition from the perspective of the experiences of students as individuals or as members of particular cohorts. Such research considers student transitions from a range of narratives and perspectives, including equity (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020), adult student identity (Brunton & Buckley, 2021), and first-year advising (Burnett & Larmar, 2011). The complexity and breadth of students' lives require approaches to transition that move beyond a "dominance of the conceptualisation of transition as linear" which "drives simplistic thinking, resulting in reductive policy and practice" (Baker & Irwin, 2019, p. 15). Approaches to transition have emerged that consider the student holistically, and transition in the context of 'whole of life' (Gale & Parker, 2012, p. 738). Gale and Parker (2012), draw on "a systematic review of the national and international literature on transition" (p. 735) and developed a comprehensive typology with three conceptions of transition; Transition as Induction (T1), Transition as Development (T2), Transition as Becoming (T3). Transition as Induction (T1) emphasises institutional concepts of transition, including linear student journeys with predictable, sequential navigation milestones of induction into established university culture and accepted practices. T1 is support by institutional interventions such as first-year sessions, orientation and timely information. Transition as Development (T2), while still conceiving transition as linear, emphasises the trajectory of students as individuals within a socio-cultural context. T2 is supported by individualised transition practices, including student mentors, placements and "Championing narratives of student and career trajectories by successful students and staff" (Gale & Parker, 2012, p.738). Transition as Becoming is Rhizomatic (T3) is the most

complex and comprehensive student-facing concept of transition Transition in T3, is holistic, fluctuating and, fragmented, requiring the navigation of various narratives and subjectivities. T3 is supported by flexible study offerings and pathways, "including multiple opportunities to change course and enter, withdraw and return to study throughout life" (Gale & Parker, 2012, p. 738).

Academic Advising

Academic advising is considered standard practice in North American universities and is being implemented internationally; however, the Australian context is still an under-researched area (Dollinger et al., 2021). Academic advising is described as:

> *"A series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising contextualises students' education experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities, and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes" (NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, 2006).*

Academic advising has predominantly been provided on campus and in person. However, recent changes in the higher education landscape, including increases in student numbers, diversification of study modes, and COVID-19, encourage the consideration of alternative approaches. Online delivery of academic advising has the potential to enhance the sustainability and cost-effectiveness of supporting a large number of students with a limited number of academic staff. Cuseo (2011) highlights how academic advising supports the transition into study and other studies substantiate the value of academic advising in supporting student success (Dollinger et al., 2021; Karmelita, 2020). Different approaches to academic advising include; developmental approaches that consider the student holistically, process-driven approaches, what the student must do, and intrusive approaches that are advisor-initiated, and tend to be reactionary and prescriptive approaches that are focused on providing information on what students should do (Troxel et al., 2022). Although different approaches do exist, foundational to academic advising is student engagement leading to their individual progress (NACADA, 2017). Online academic advising was explored as an option

for the enabling program, because of the diverse student population of various needs and high enrolments, with the majority being online and achieving equitable access to all students by online delivery and considering the challenged financial environment of providing academic and student support.

Methodology

Online academic advising development

In considering how best to support student transitions a trial was conducted in which 120 students were regularly contacted by email and phone calls through their first semester of study to explore their experiences and ascertain their needs. This trial found students 1) experienced enrolment and lacked awareness of ways to consider and adjust their study load; 2) needed specific guidance through all the firsts (e.g., enrolment process, navigating LMS (Learning Management System), accessing support services); 3) needed accessible information at 'point of use' and 4) needed varying levels of support, from minimal to intensive. The trial and a review of literature review indicated the value of using a constructivist pedagogy (Bada et al, 2015). This pedagogy is based on encouraging students to construct their knowledge through experience and activities rather than directed, this is comprised of a suite of inter-connected approaches which informed the design of online academic advising. This involved mastery of enrolment, through self-guided lessons and agency in decision-making. Empowering the student throughout the onboarding and commencing of study was essential in their experiential learning. Developing a self-regulated learner is an outcome of academic advising and is of particular importance with students who are new to higher education study. The online academic advising drew upon adult learning principles (Knowles, 1980) to develop student-centred learning experiences that actively involve the learner in building on and extending their prior experience and knowledge developing student capacity and agency for immediately applicable, timely, aspects of their transition. The online academic advising was facilitated through the institute's LMS (Moodle), providing an interactive learning environment with a tiered support structure, and adapting Lizzio's (2006) senses of success (purpose, connectedness, academic self, self-efficacy, growth & resilience, and exploration &

enjoyment) across five phases that each considered the potential point of student attrition, as indicated by the initial trial. The phases, and aspects of support, were Readiness (enrolment), Orientation (setting up for study), Commencement (planning for managing multiple simultaneous study and assessment tasks), Enrichment (focused on motivation and maintenance of study habits) and Outcome (reflection and action-oriented to what next) (Figure 1). A Getting ready to enrol section was also designed to prepare students so they could enrol effectively. It guided them through accessing information and questions that assisted them to be able to make informed and suitable choices for their personal situation.

Figure 1: The five phases of the online academic advising approach.

Online academic advising was designed to develop and reflect the ways in which the various senses of success were pertinent to each transition phase. Each phase had a range of self-directed interactive student learning and reflection activities made available to the student at the relevant time and building on their existing knowledge. A tiered support structure was incorporated into selected activities with two-way interaction to encourage students to self-identify when they needed to access support services and for academic advisors to view, respond and act when required. The tiered model facilitated students to access various levels of support; from minimal guidance through to personal support by an academic advisor, encouraging students to be self-regulated engaged learners. The online academic advising was managed and monitored by a small team of academic advisors who provided proactive academic support to empower student agency in their transition into university.

Research questions

Rotar's (2020) recent systematic review of existing research on university online student support strategies highlights areas of research oversight, investigations of transitions, and studies that measure and evaluate the impact of support interventions. Thus, the aim of this study is to evaluate students' engagement with online academic advising in supporting their transitions into a university preparation course. The study evaluated online academic advising, considering the following research questions.

1. How did students engage with online academic advising when transitioning through their first semester of online study?

2. What did students find beneficial and useful about online academic advising?

3. What does this engagement suggest about the potential value and benefits of online academic advising approaches for student transitions into university?

4. How does applying a transition typology evaluate to online academic advising?

Method

A convergent parallel, mixed methods research approach was used to evaluate student experiences of accessing online academic advising to support transition into higher education study. Mixed methods research approaches support multiple methodologies (Cohen, 2017) and enabled the study to capture quantitative student data, enriched by qualitative student reflections on their transition experiences. Convergent parallel design facilitated the simultaneous, comparative analysis of quantitative and qualitative data (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2018) and allowed the data in this investigation to be coherently merged.

Sampling and participant demographics

Data was collected over three semesters from 199 students who accessed online academic advising during their first semester of study in an enabling program. Ethics was approved, prior to participants being invited via an email invitation to an online survey. Participation was

voluntary and the invitation email was only sent to students after completion of their first studies, to avoid potential academic-student power or grade-related bias. Table 1 provides the enrolment data of the participants, and is representative of the student population, 68% of participants had more than 10 years since high school, the majority were enrolled in 3 courses, and (82%) were studying online.

Table 1: Participants' enrolment data

Time from high school	<1 year	1-5 years	5-10 years	10-20 years	20-30 years	> 30 years
	11.3%	9.6%	10.7%	31.6%	23.2%	13.6%
Course enrolment	1 Course		2 Courses		3 Courses	4 Courses
	23%		28%		39%	10%
Mode of study	Online study mode				On campus study mode	
	82%.				18%	

Data collection and analysis

The study evaluated how students engaged with, and what they valued in online academic advising. An online survey was selected as surveys offer a proven data collection method, commonly used to obtain feedback from students at various stages of their learning journeys (Kember & Ginns, 2012). The survey was designed with a range of open and closed questions, to investigate their engagement of online academic advising, the extent to which they valued these elements and what they valued from online academics about the approach. The survey was tested for validity and reliability before being administered. The primary source of data was student responses to a series of Likert scale survey questions which was descriptively analysed using SPSS (Creswell et al., 2003). The secondary source of data, the open-ended questions, were simultaneously thematically analysed. The thematic analysis was inductive and iterative following the commonly used framework of familiarisation, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes before selecting extracts for the final report (Kiger & Varpioa, 2020). The analysis used NVivo 12 to support coding the open-ended written responses, clustering patterns of expressions of what students valued in the experience. In this way the analysis moved beyond simply cataloguing

responses to exploring meaningful references to ideas and concepts (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The resulting themes generated by the thematic analysis were triangulated against, and converged with, the quantitative student preference data to provide the integrated findings that were the outcomes of the study.

Findings

1. Quantitative Data

Student perceptions of the benefits of the online academic advising

The majority of participants (78.4 %) indicated that the online academic advising was helpful (5% did not consider the approach to be helpful, and 16.6 % responded they are unsure). The most frequently identified benefit was planning study, by 82%. Other highly agreed benefits were being connected with university staff, engaging with study, developing a sense of academic-self, and building confidence and motivation as a learner. Only 57% rated a benefit of a place to meet students (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Participants' perception on benefits of online academic advising (%)
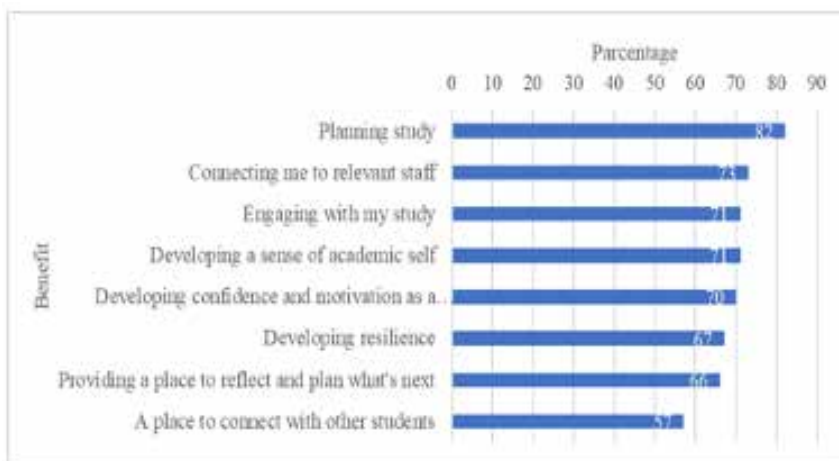
The survey also explored the frequency of student use of the six components of the online academic advising platform (Getting ready to enrol Section, Readiness Phase, Orientation Phase, Commencement

Phase, Enrichment Phase and Outcome Phase) and found that students accessed and used online academic advising more in the early stages of the semester, with use showing a steady decrease, but still remaining at a high 61% in the final outcome stage. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: The section and phases that participants accessed (%)
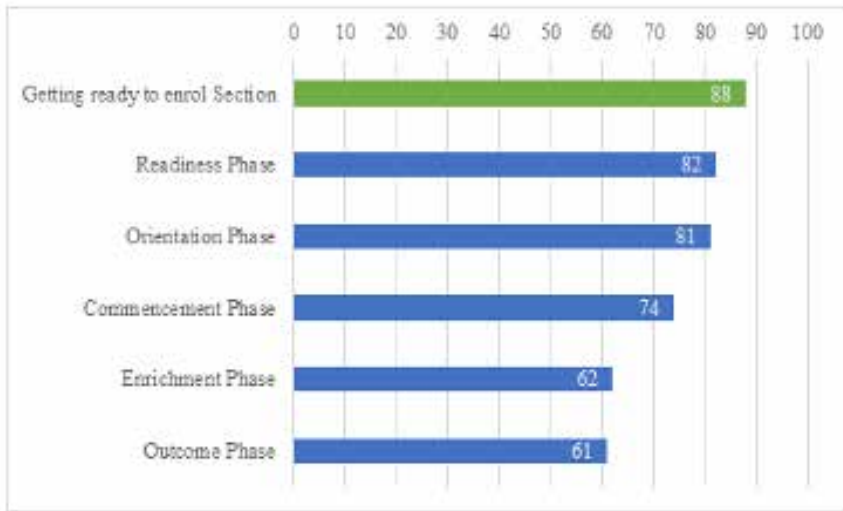
The study explored the student engagement with the features of online academic advising. Likert-style response options allowed students to rate their academic advising experience, with options from very useful to not useful, for each aspect of the online academic advising approach. Figure 4 displays student data on the usefulness of ten aspects of online academic advising. In general, all aspects were considered useful, but the data particularly highlighted the valuing of support that offered guidance through the enrolment process, connecting with staff, and developing a sense of belonging.

Figure 4 How online academic advising was useful for the participants

2. Qualitative Data

The survey also contained three qualitative questions encouraging students to clarify or expand upon their experiences and gathered over 400 comments. The thematic analysis of these students' responses (see Table 2) generated two themes, offering insight into what students valued about the online academic advising approach. The first theme was Students value transition support. This theme was composed of three subthemes relating to the types of support valued by the students: enrolment support, access to information and support in making connections. A further theme, Students value navigability, was apparent from the qualitative student responses and capture responses related to the students valuing ease of navigability and user-friendliness when accessing online academic advising.

Table 2: Themes from qualitative analysis

Themes	Components
Students value transition support	Enrolment guidance
	Information
	Connectedness – relationships and student identity
Students value navigability	Ease of access in using the LMS facilitating the online academic advising approach
	User-friendliness

The findings show that students engage with online academic advising, with 78.4% saying yes, online academic advising was useful and it was most useful at the start of the semester in the Getting ready to enrol phase (88%) and declined over the remainder of the semester to Outcomes phase (61%). The quantitative and qualitative data present what participants perceived as the benefits of online academic advising and how useful it was. Participants indicated agreement with benefits, and top were planning study, connecting with staff and engaging with my study. Participants found online academic advising most useful for the enrolment process, for connecting with staff, feeling part of the university and for getting information they needed.

Discussion

1. Student experiences of engagement with online academic advising

Overall, the study offers insight into student engagement with online academic advising and indicates the approach offered support and was beneficial to the students. The data indicates students are most active before and at the beginning of the semester according to the use of the Getting ready to enrol section, readiness and orientation phase. Student activity did reduce as the semester progressed, which may be attributed to students developing confidence, and connecting with peers and teachers, thus, reducing the use of online academic advising as they developed their sense of purpose, developing self-efficacy and feeling they belong as they learn and enjoy their studies indicating achievement

towards senses of success and confidence as required according to Jones et al., (2019) and Pritchard et al., (2018).

Enrolment guidance: Both the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that students value enrolment guidance. Of the students surveyed, 83% agree/strongly agree online academic advising guided them through the enrolment process. It is critical that students commence study feeling in control and able to navigate the required activities of enrolment and orientation to prepare for being a functioning student and ready for success. Thangavelu et al. (2019) highlighted the value of an integrated service model of enrolment support, providing a positive experience for new students starting in a new environment. Students commencing study have questions and concerns about what program and courses to do. This concern has been recognised in the literature (Lawrence et al., 2019) and the online academic advising provides the support and can facilitate students enrolling successfully and confidently. This is suggested by the qualitative data such as student comments that the online academic advising supported students by, "*help(ing) to choose and decide the right courses to enrol in*", "*Assisting with enrolment*", "*Being guided through enrolment!*" and "*Help(ing) enrol and get(ing) everything ready for start of studies.*" As one respondent commented, "*The most significant benefits to me was all the early advice and help getting enrolled and getting started with my studies because I have been out of study for many years and so was a bit unsure about what I should do*".

Relevant, timely information: Quality timely information is another theme revealed by the quantitative and qualitative data. Access to quality and timely information contributes to the ability of commencing students to make informed decisions and limit the anxiety they may experience when entering a new environment. Student experiences in enabling programs are improved by clear and easy-to- access information about the purpose and structure of their programs (McKay, et al., 2018). Students require access to information when they need it and at a time that is convenient and in a format they can use. Heagney & Benson (2017) highlighted that quality timely information supports and empowers students at the start of studies and at various stages. Thus, the information needs to be tailored to the recipient, and this was supported by the online academic advising phases which gave information at the relevant point in time and built confidence an agency

in the student. (McKay et al., 2018; Zepke, 2018). The survey responses noted student perceptions of the usefulness and benefits of the various learning experiences embedded in LMS used to facilitate the online academic advising approach. This point was reinforced by students' comments such as the online academic advising provided "*Me (the student) personally with information and support when I needed it.*" The qualitative data contains 65 comments about timely, quality and accessible information, these open comments corroborate the findings of online academic advising providing timely information "*It is user friendly and the information is presented in a positive and supportive tone*", "*it provided great information and guidance on the stages from enrolment to the end of the semester*" and "*All the important information in one place*".

Feeling connected: Connectedness is a third salient aspect for students commencing study (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; Thomas, 2012), emphasized by both the quantitative and qualitative data. Students' feelings of connection validate they are in the 'right place. A sense of connectedness requires students to develop new relationships with staff and students. Interestingly the data findings have indicated a higher agreement level for connecting to relevant staff (78%) than opportunity to connect with other students (62%). However, this could be because it can be challenging to form asynchronously connections with a dispersed online peer group. Nevertheless, the survey responses noted that 75% agree or strongly agree that the online academic advising helped them feel part of the university, and 62% agreed the approach developed their student identity. The qualitative data supports and adds detail to the survey data through student comments such as, "*a great place when needed to connect with others and staff*", "*it helped to connect with teachers and other online students*", "*it was good to connect with other students and staff for asking questions*" "*it helped me connect to my peer and the uni support network*", "*it helps to share and gain ideas and knowledge.*" With students realising they are connected and confident, students feel empowered and can contribute and take ownership of their student agency and motivation (Stone, 2022). Finally, the open-ended nature of the qualitative questions allowed students to express ideas external to the survey questions. A second theme in the qualitative data was that students valued accessibility in the design and navigation of the LMS platform that facilitated the

online academic advising approach. Student comments were divided on this theme. Many students commented that they valued online academic advising because it was accessible and "*easy to navigate.*" Other students disagreed, commenting that the LMS "*can be confusing when navigating*" and suggesting to "*make site layout easier/simpler to navigate for people who are not familiar with computing*". Online academic advising was the students' first experience with university's online systems and both types of comments, the positive and negative, highlight the value students place on the navigability of university systems. The theme of navigability offers a salient reminder when considering designing online academic advising for students who may be novices to university systems and online.

2. Applying a transition typology to evaluate online academic advising

Gale & Parker's (2012) transition typology provided a lens to evaluate online academic advising.

Transition as induction: Transition as induction considers the student journey as an enculturation into the practices and culture of the university. Although students in enabling programs typically have a wealth of life experience, they often have limited experience with a higher educational institution and need an introduction and orientation to the culture, expectations and procedures. The online academic advising is aligned with this category of transition as an induction. The success of transition as induction is evidenced in the findings and the reflective comments "*online academic advising was helpful in giving advice and information and helping with understanding how Uni operates.*" It also provided the support in adjusting to university "*online academic advising was extremely helpful to me as I have never studied at University*" and "*online academic advising initially helped me to understand what I needed to do and helped me get ready to commence studying*".

Transition as Development: Transition as development considers the students' personal development and forming of a student identity. The individual recognises the changed environment they find themselves in and can form habits e.g., studying and interacting with people who will become their new circle of influence and support system. Meeting and interacting with staff and students online or in person are indicative of the new environment they find themselves in. The findings are

consistent with students forming a sense of connectedness and ability to navigate this new ecosystem. The success of transition as development is evidenced in the findings and reflective comments: "*This was particularly beneficial as an online mature-age student,*" and "*it gave me some reassurance and confidence getting started.*" "*I found it great to reflect on myself and study methods and it was helpful as it made me feel like I wasn't [alone] starting my university journey.*"

Transition as Becoming: Transition as becoming considers the complex nature of change and learning. It includes agency and ownership of choices, actions and attitudes, recognising that transition is not a singular, linear path but multifaceted, iterative and rhizomatic. The success of transition as becoming is more challenging to address and evaluate. Online academic advising aims to support students both personally as individuals and collectively as a cohort. There are reflective comments that alluded to a change, such as "*developing a sense of resilience*" and "*Gaining a sense of support, and great to reflect on skills and readiness*". However, the study does not provide significant confirmation of Transition as becoming, as the data collection did not explore the personal aspirations of transition and change. This observation highlights the value of using typologies and frameworks that represent a developmental approach when critically examining student support initiatives.

Limitations

A key limitation is that the study examines an instance of an online academic advising for enabling students at a regional university. Student experiences of a differently designed approach in an alternate context may not provide similar findings. Also, as the participants chose to take part in the survey, in their own time and of their own volition, the data may be skewed towards students with strong opinions of the efficacy or failures of the advising approach. However, the findings of this study offer experiential insights that may be transferable to other contexts where an online academic advising may be considered due to a similar adult learner cohort in which the majority of students study online.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore adult learners' engagement in online academic advising to support their transition into their first semester of study in an enabling program. Transition is a complex and multifaceted concept, requiring consideration and critical examination from a range of perspectives, including student induction, development and becoming and the institution's role in evaluating success. Transition needs to embrace adult learners, who are often non-traditional students and help them belong. The findings provide evidence engaging with online academic advising has benefits and is useful and empowers agentic, self-regulated learners. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data has indicated that students valued the three broad areas of transition support: enrolment guidance, timely and accurate information and feeling connected. The qualitative data corroborated and added the need for online advising platforms to be easily navigated. Overlaying the study's findings with a transition typology, which offered a range of perspectives for critical reflection, highlighted online academic advising was most effective in supporting transition conceptualised as induction into university expectations, cultures and systems, and transition conceptualised as developing as a student, including developing a sense of belonging and student identity. While the findings of this study of online academic advising are encouraging, further research needs to be conducted to explore the value of online academic advising in a range of contexts for students and higher education institutions.

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