Supporting Bereaved Students in Higher Education: Student Perspectives

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Data Availability Statement

Ethical approval precludes the data being used for another purpose or being available to

others. Specifically, the ethical approval specifies that public results are in aggregate form to

maintain confidentiality and privacy and precludes identifiable records (i.e., transcripts) being

made publicly available.

Abstract

Bereavement is a universal experience, and more common within the higher education student population than is often recognised. The present study aimed to understand the experiences and support needs of bereaved Australian university students. In semi-structured interviews, 12 students (10 women, 2 men; $M_{age} = 38.13$, $SD = 15.37$) shared their experiences of bereavement while studying. A thematic analysis resulted in three themes: Relationships between study and bereavement, Navigating the university system, and What students need. The findings highlighted varying levels of support accessed and level of need, which were influenced by the circumstances of the student and the loss, mode of study, personal resources, and perceptions of the university system's ability to help. The findings highlight the need to develop and communicate clear policies and procedures so that bereaved students are supported.

Introduction

Bereavement is a common experience among students in higher education, with almost one-third experiencing a death loss during their studies (Balk et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2015; Varga et al., 2021a). The university environment demands continuous high performance, meeting deadlines for assessments, passing examinations, and participating in social campus activities, all of which might be challenging for bereaved students (Cupit et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2021; Hardison et al., 2005; Neimeyer et al., 2008; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Bereaved students report and demonstrate reduced test performance, lower grade-point averages, difficulty concentrating, and require more time to complete tasks (Cupit et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2021; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Thus, bereaved students are at risk of voluntary withdrawal from the university, especially if they cannot find appropriate support (Hedman, 2012; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

The most appropriate and beneficial forms of support for bereaved university students include providing information at orientation regarding the prevalence of bereavement and the normal grieving process, offering drop-in and peer-led support groups, and implementing a student bereavement policy (Cox et al., 2015; Cupit et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2021; Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020; Parikh & Servaty-Seib, 2013; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Walker et al., 2014). However, there are many ways universities can provide support to bereaved university students, including engagement with staff, on-campus counselling, and tailored administration processes (Cupit et al., 2016; Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Hedman, 2012; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Valentine & Woodthorpe, 2020; Walker et al., 2014).

Addressing isolation experienced by bereaved university students and providing a space for bereft students to talk about how they feel may come from a variety of sources, including academic staff, on-campus counselling, peers, and peer-led support groups (Cox et

al., 2015; Cupit et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2021; Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Parikh & Servaty-

Seib, 2013; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010; Varga et al., 2021a;

Walker et al., 2014). For instance, staff could show a personal interest in bereaved students

experiences through inquiry, providing time to listen, and offering validating statements

(Cupit et al., 2016; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Walker et al., 2014). Another example is

peer-led support groups that have been implemented at various universities in the United

States, which provide an environment for bereaved students to share their experiences of

bereavement and grief (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012).

Bereaved students can also be supported by formal administrative processes that

manage assessment extensions, examination deferrals, and unit withdrawals (Liew &

Servaty-Seib, 2020; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). For example, Hedman (2012)

interviewed 123 staff members and found that the majority were highly supportive of

informally helping bereaved students by providing assignment extensions and rescheduling

examinations, especially within the week of bereavement. However, staff were less

supportive of providing leniency with coursework deadlines if bereavement occurred a month

or more before the scheduled date (Hedman, 2012). A reduction in staff support can

disenfranchise and invalidate students' grief when it extends beyond the immediate few

weeks, preventing students from seeking and receiving support, despite evidence that shows

grief is present months and years after the death (Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al., 2016; Cupit et

al., 2021; Doka, 2002; Hardison et al., 2005; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Servaty-Seib &

Taub, 2008; Walker et al., 2016).

Campaigns for student bereavement policies have occurred in the United States to

provide consistent guidelines for permitted absences following a death and the opportunity to

complete alternative coursework for missed assignments (Cupit et al., 2016; Fajgenbaum et

al., 2012; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Walker et al., 2014).

The introduction of a formal student bereavement policy helps mandate consistent treatment of bereaved students and saves academic and administrative staff time (Neubert, 2011). Additionally, policy helps communicate to students that the university is compassionate and respectful (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Hedman, 2012; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020; Neubert, 2011; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

Research to date has gathered information almost exclusively from students in American tertiary institutions where the geographical distance from support networks has a significant impact (Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al., 2016; Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Pennington, 2013; Valentine & Woodthorpe, 2020; Walker et al., 2014). In contrast, many Australian university students live at home with their families or share houses, are close to their support networks, and do not live on campus. This proximity may facilitate the accessibility of support networks external to tertiary institutions for Australian university students compared to their overseas counterparts. Colleges in the United States also have fewer mature-age students and most previous studies have focused on students aged between 18 and 25 (Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al., 2016; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020; Pennington, 2013; Walker et al., 2014). A study of supports for bereaved university students in Australia adds to the international body of literature and aligns with Cupit and Servaty-Seib's (2013) call for more international research on this topic. We, therefore, took an exploratory, qualitative approach to understand bereaved university students' support needs within the context of a secular, Australian university.

Method

Participants and Recruitment

The inclusion criterion for participants was to have experienced bereavement while being enrolled, or in the year prior to, commencing university studies. Participants were recruited by advertising through the university online student portal. Eighteen university

students enquired about this research. Six of these individuals did not participate in the study because they did not meet the inclusion criterion or did not respond to return emails providing the research information and offer to schedule an interview.

Of the 12 participants, 9 were interviewed in person and 2 were interviewed by telephone ($M_{age} = 38.13$, $SD = 15.37$); one was interviewed via an email conversation at the participant's request. One telephone interview was conducted due to the participant living in another state and the other conducted to accommodate incompatible schedules for an in-person interview. Characteristics of participants and their relationship to the deceased person are presented in Table 1. Time since bereavement, cause of death, and length of leaves of absence, are not included in Table 1 to protect participants' identities.

Materials

A semi-structured interview guide was developed with open-ended questions (see Appendix) informed by previous studies. The emphasis placed on the loss, relationships with peers, communication and response from staff, and general support practices in previous research guided the development of the guide (Cupit et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2014). Closed demographic questions were asked at the end of each interview.

Procedure

This study received ethical clearance from Curtin University (Approval Number HRE2018-0041). All participants were informed of the nature and aim of the research and provided written consent before being interviewed. Following the circulation of the research advertisement, potential participants emailed the first author who provided potential participants with a research information statement and consent form and allowed them to ask any questions.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participant identities were protected by removing all names from all transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were saved using

the participant's interview date and time. Guest et al. (2006) proposed that data saturation occurs, for the most part, after conducting and analysing 12 interviews. However, recent analyses are critical of a priori determination of sample sizes in thematic analysis so we collected and analysed data concurrently (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The decision to cease data collection was informed by the concept of sufficient informational power (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data Analysis and Rigour

Data were analysed by the first author using processes outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were reread and ideas and reflections noted to enable immersion in and familiarity with the data. Topic codes were identified for the entire data set, which served as descriptions of the content. Analytic codes that required interpretation of the patterns between topic codes were then derived. For example, topic codes including *academic transcript a reminder of the loss* and *did not acknowledge the impact of grief on grades* developed to the interpretation of the analytic code *link between bereavement and study*. Analytic codes were then organised into categories and condensed and refined into potential themes and sub-themes. These potential themes and sub-themes were then organised into a thematic map.

Themes were developed by identifying commonalities and relations between analytic codes and written into a table with descriptions of the theme and preliminary exemplar quotes. It was important to differentiate aspects of the themes to provide a richer understanding of the participants' experiences. There is some overlap between sub-themes, reflective of the interrelated nature of the cognitive, emotional, and relational impacts of bereavement; still, each sub-theme is understood within the major theme under which it is indicated. The thematic map was reviewed to represent the data set before final themes and sub-themes were labelled, defined, and sorted to create a coherent analysis. The data were reviewed for exemplar quotes that corresponded to the themes and sub-themes, further

solidifying the final thematic structure as an accurate representation of the data set and participants' experiences.

Data triangulation was implemented by interviewing participants of various ages and from different university programs (Golafshani, 2003). Member-checking was employed to ensure appropriate data interpretation (Mays & Pope, 1995). Of the six participants who request their transcript, one provided minor corrections to the interpretation of their story. Of the nine participants who requested a summary of the study, six participants provided feedback, with all six satisfied with the fairness of the representation of their story. Investigator triangulation was used via other authors providing feedback on the preliminary themes and sub-themes (Golafshani, 2003; Mays & Pope, 1995). During this process, the definition of themes and sub-themes were clarified and the grouping and order of sub-themes were finalised.

Findings

Three themes and nine sub-themes were extracted. The themes represent an overview of the participants' experiences of bereavement while studying and the support they need from the university: *relationships between study and bereavement*, *navigating the university system*, and *what students need*. A numeric participant code (P1 to P12) is provided with each data extract.

Relationships between Study and Bereavement

The theme "Relationships between Study and Bereavement" reflects the ways students described the connection between their experiences of grief and bereavement with their ability to study or their academic performance. Some participants described their bereavement and studies as linked while others described making conscious efforts to separate the two. Either way, the described the impact on their academic performance, and that continuing their studies was a way to honour the deceased and provide purpose.

Reduced academic performance. All participants described ways grief negatively impacted their academic performance. Lack of concentration and poor memory, sleep difficulties, and tearfulness were identified as ways that grief impeded the students' abilities to study, write assignments, and prepare for examinations. Some participants reflected that they were not aware at the time of the bereavement the impact grief would have on their academic performance, thought they should be able to perform at their usual academic standards, and then expressed frustration with their grades: "I know I'm not going to have done as well as what I should have [but] I'm pretty sure I did enough to pass, touch wood" (P4). Others observed a reduction in academic performance but with time could put their performance into context: "I wound up with credits and I was disappointed with those grades… that's not my standard, but then I didn't really give myself acknowledgement that that's what I went through" (P5) and "I realised afterwards, I was like, nah, I probably could've done better if that all didn't happen" (P6).

Honouring the deceased through university achievements. Continuing and completing university studies became a way for participants to honour the memory of the deceased person. One participant described feeling connected to her daughter through her tertiary studies:

> I wanted to sort of fulfil that because, one, it was my passion, but two, I didn't want to
> lose that connection with her… that's what she expected of me and that's what life
> would have been like had she not been lost. (P2)

Another participant described completing her university degree as a way of honouring the memory of her father and his values: "It became something *for* Dad, rather than about me. He had a thing about completing what one started" (P10).

Study providing purpose. Several participants described ways in which university studies helped these students regain purpose and drive in their lives. One participant

explained, "I think the grief about what had happened sort of motivated me more to want to do well" (P1). Focusing on studies served a practical purpose in providing a distraction from the pain of their bereavement. For example, "I knew that I would need something to keep me occupied over the rest of the semester, just to stop me from going crazy, or just to have something else to focus on that's very cut and dry" (P9).

Navigating the University System

The theme "Navigating the University System" encompasses the various experiences participants had in navigating university processes and procedures following bereavement. The type of relationship participants had with staff before the bereavement seemed to influence the anticipated and actual experience participants had in navigating the system. Many participants described having the perception that the system was too hard to navigate and that they should just keep going with their studies, assignments, and examinations without adjustments or accommodations. Some participants discussed the benefits of withdrawing and applying for extensions, while others explained why extensions were not considered.

Existing relationships with staff. Participants who reflected having a good rapport with staff felt more comfortable talking to them about their bereavement. Participants who had existing positive relationships with staff expected these lecturers, tutors, and unit coordinators to be supportive and compassionate. For example, "I already had a relationship of some years with my supervisor given she is also who I tutor [and] mark for; I knew she was likely to be compassionate" (P10). Additionally, some participants described that they believed the existing rapport they had with staff made it easier to navigate the university system not only for applying for extensions and withdrawal, but also their ability to return to university studies following bereavement. Conversely, one participant described feeling unsupported by staff. For example, the participant described being notified that she would fail

the unit if she missed a class following bereavement and that "there was absolutely no sensitivity toward me" and that her grief "was just completely ignored" (P11).

Studying online likely does not provide the same opportunity to develop rapport and relationships with staff as studying on-campus. One participant stated, "I didn't discuss it with my lecturers at all. I didn't see it to be anything that they could help me with" (P12). The perception that staff would not be able to help and only need to know if they are directly impacted could reflect the difference between students who study online and those who study on-campus and have face-to-face relationships with staff. However, one online student described feeling supported by staff to navigate the system: "I had the rapport with the unit coordinator and the tutors, or I'd told them at the time I was going to do that [withdraw under special circumstances], and they had the history with me as well" (P1).

"Getting it done." Many participants described having the belief that submitting something, even of a lesser standard, was easier than navigating the system. For example, "I just submitted it and, it could've been better, but I just submitted it and was done with it because it was easier" (P6). Participants described that if they did not get their coursework completed when it was due, it would lead to postponing coursework and deadlines, prolonging and delaying the process and completion, and creating more stress in the long-term. Participants anticipated that they would cause more stress for themselves and were worried about coping with this stress if they postponed assignments and examinations. For example:

> It was hard because I had to think, if I delay it now, it's going to affect exams and study and everything else, and whether I do it now or after the funeral, it's just going to be too hard. I didn't reach out and get extra help… I kinda just went with the flow… It was just so close to the end of semester and I just wanted it done. (P4)

Participants who did not apply for extensions or withdrawals were more likely to be younger students and studying full-time. The participants who described applying for extensions and withdrawals were more likely to have experienced the death of a child or the death of someone who lived interstate or internationally. Participants who received extensions or withdrawals described the benefits of withdrawing from units and receiving extensions for coursework and examinations, including spending time with family, having time and space to grieve and process the bereavement, and reducing stress. For example: "I needed to be able to let it go for as long as it took to focus on family" (P10) and "Once I'd had that time off and had spent time with the family… I was ready to come back [to study]" (P3). One participant who experienced the death of a child explained, "I didn't need that extra stress [of university studies] on top of what was already going on in my life" (P8).

What Students Need

The theme "What Students Need" reflected on what students felt they needed from university staff and procedures immediately following their bereavement and into the future. This theme encompasses the various participant needs that were met and participant needs that were identified as important and that would have made a difference if they had been met. Many participants identified the need to feel that they matter and are seen by various university staff. Some participants reflected on the need for the university and staff to be proactive in identifying high-risk students and those who may need help and information. Transparent processes and procedures were also identified as something that would have assisted participants in navigating their university studies and the system more easily during a time of stress and bereavement.

To feel they matter and are seen. Participants described the importance of feeling that they matter and are seen by academic and administrative staff. As one participant illustrated, "my tutor last year was lovely, like, not intrusive, but kind, and it's just that kindness… that's

important" (P9). Participants identified that feeling that they matter, are cared for, and seen meant being experienced as a human being rather than as a number or a customer. Some participants described that staff who were compassionate and who provided information made them feel that they mattered. One participant described feeling validated by a communication from the university acknowledging their bereavement:

> The way that the university handled it. They sent me a really beautiful message, "We're so sorry for the loss of your Nanna… Here is the results that have come through, your special circumstances being approved." For me, it was really special, that they'd taken the time to actually address what had happened… It was really thoughtful. (P1)

Other participants were dissatisfied with the response and lack of support from university staff. For example:

> I felt very, very alone and unsupported by the university… When I was sent to apply for an extension so I could attend the funeral, all hell broke loose, and I felt very much a number in the pack, and I was not a person. (P3)

To receive proactive support. Some participants identified the impact grief has on decision-making and rational thinking. As articulated by one participant, "You're just so introspective about your own emotional hurt and pain that you're thinking [about] what I need from them [university staff]" (P11). Some participants described having concerns for bereaved students who are younger and perhaps not as equipped to cope, or international students with limited support networks. Thus, participants suggested that staff could act proactively to identify at-risk students early on, prevent withdrawal and drop-out, and encourage support-seeking, and offer information and guidance so that students are aware of their options and can make informed decisions at times of bereavement:

Early on, [I would have liked] a list of "these are the things that we can offer you and these are the things that you need to do." I wasn't entirely sure what, like, whether I had to apply for a leave of absence from my degree. I wrote to people and then I had to wait weeks for somebody to get back to me … And then maybe something similar on the other end, like "Now that you're re-enrolling, these are the other things that we can offer you." (P2)

Participants emphasised the importance of staff and peers initiating conversations about their wellbeing and to identify individual needs following bereavement. For example, "Having someone initiate that conversation with me, 'How are you going? What do you think? Do you have any questions?' Just having a person to be able to phone [or] just having someone [there] makes a big difference" (P9). Such conversations would complement online information:

The best idea would be to have, like, presentable information on [the online student portal], just have like a sentence, a few words or something, Just *grief*. Click. I think that would be good… You can't tell by looking at somebody [that they're grieving] … The only thing you can do is [provide] specific items like dealing with death and stuff like that, maybe a separate tab or something. (P12)

Clear university processes and procedures. Participants reflected on the importance of clear university processes and procedures in relation to bereavement. Participants who applied for extensions reflected that there was no clear, reasonable timeframe for extensions, and received different responses from staff regarding extension deadlines. For example, "One [lecturer] gave me a week and one gave me two months… my experience is there's a great variation in the knowledge in the staff of what's available, what the processes are" (P8). Some participants suggested that streamlined or new processes would assist bereaved students to navigate the system when applying for extensions and withdrawals, such as using

a student liaison officer rather than relying on conversations with multiple staff members. One participant suggested that a policy specific to bereavement that outlines processes and entitlements would help students and staff navigate clear procedures within the university system.

Some participants shared their difficulties in getting supporting documentation. One participant described, "If there was one thing that would've been nice is if the one letter could've been sent to all four of the unit coordinators as opposed to me having to get four, [because] that was added stress" (P7). Being asked to provide medical and/or death certificates or proof of a funeral was time-consuming, insensitive, and stressful at a time when other tasks were a priority.

The part of the process I struggled with was the need to provide a medical certificate. [It] took two weeks to get [in] to see the GP [and] took two hours to wait to see him on the day … There must be a more sensitive way of managing this part of the process?... I felt a fraud going to a doctor when I was not ill. (P10)

The process very invasive because they [administrative staff] didn't want to give me the extension unless I had proof that I was going to a funeral. Their process was to either have me come in and do an emergency counselling session which I didn't have time for because I was going to the funeral, or I had to go to the doctor and get a certificate to say I was going to a funeral... It's just not appropriate, to have to get a medical certificate to say you're going to a funeral. (P3)

Support services to meet their needs. Some participants did not access the university's counselling and welfare services. For some, this was because they were supported by their family and friends or professional services off-campus. However, some participants who did not access university counselling explained that they questioned the legitimacy of their need for bereavement-related support. For example, "I figured a university counsellor is just for

school-related stuff" (P12) and "You think, 'Oh no, that's [for] when you're having a mental

breakdown,' or 'crazy people go there.' You don't think, 'maybe this can help me through a

shitty time in my life'" (P4).

Those participants who did access the university counselling service reflected that it

was difficult to access, particularly due to the triage system and wait times to see a

counsellor. For example:

> I had been seeing a counsellor and, it's actually really hard to get in, because, I mean,
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> it's obviously quite popular... broke students getting counselling... for free... So, it
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> meant I didn't get to see her as often as I would've liked. (P7)
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> The keepers of the gate weren't going to let me pass, at all... Unfortunately, I think it
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> makes it too difficult for those that are really struggling and, of course, the trouble is
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> that the ones that are really struggling don't need an extra hurdle to go over. (P8)

Discussion

The aim of this research was to understand the support needs of bereaved university

students. We found that the majority of the students who participated described unique

experiences of bereavement alongside involvement in their studies (e.g., theme

'Relationships between study and bereavement' and 'Navigating the university system').

Participants also described a range of responses from the university after experiencing

bereavement and made suggestions for how the university could better support them (e.g.,

theme 'What students need'). These themes highlight that the level of support accessed, and

level of need varied depending on several factors, including mode of study, availability of

peer support, individual resources and support available external to the university, and

perceptions about the university system's ability to help.

The participants reported many experiences that align with previous findings,

including the impact of bereavement on academic performance, how only a small percentage

of bereaved students access counselling support, similar barriers to accessing counselling, the importance of improving flexibility for extensions and coursework, and the need for greater sensitivity from staff, peers, procedures, and policies when approaching student bereavement (e.g., Cox et al., 2015; Cupit et al., 2021; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020). Consistent with previous research, the participants described how people listen and demonstrate they care as important to processing grief and feeling safe, and that they coped with their bereavement and grief by finding meaning, talking to family and friends, and taking time to process the death (e.g., Cupit et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2021; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020; Parikh & Servaty-Seib, 2013; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Walker et al., 2014).

All participants described ways in which grief impacted their ability to study. Lack of concentration, brain fog, and poor memory were identified most often. As reported by some participants, several withdrew from university studies as a direct result of bereavement. Within the sample, all continued with or returned to study, yet many reported that they did not access on-campus counselling support. There may be multiple reasons for this, including a lack of information about counselling services, bereavement policies, the medicalisation of grief (e.g., needing to provide supporting documentation).

For some, continuing their studies and academic achievements became a way for them to honour the deceased person, which is consistent with literature that highlights the importance of continuing and redefining one's relationship with the deceased and finding meaning in the loss (Lipp & O'Brien, 2020; Neimeyer et al., 2008). For participants who described honouring the deceased through tertiary studies, university became a more meaningful and positive experience. The experiences described by participants are consistent with literature that suggests students who can create meaning from their loss are better able to process their grief and recover academically and in their overall functioning than those who do not find meaning in their loss (Hardison et al., 2005; Neimeyer et al., 2008).

Throughout each of the broad themes that were explored, the participants appeared to express an underlying experience of grief being disenfranchised in the university context. Grief is disenfranchised when it is not openly acknowledged, socially accepted, or publicly mourned (Doka, 2002). Many participants explained their lack of need for counselling services and accessing extensions and withdrawals through comparison to other students' situations. Some of the participants may have disenfranchised their own grief by initially being disappointed in their performance shortly after bereavement and/or that grief experiences are not deserving of support in that way that other concerns (e.g., illness) are. When students are experiencing pressure to perform academically, they may believe that their grief experience should not influence their academic performance and that they should be able to function normally, further disenfranchising their own grief (Doka, 2002; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). These issues underscore why Servaty-Seib and Taub (2008) trained staff members and resident assistants to respond to bereaved students. Thus, the grieving student's individual circumstances are important, but so too is their knowledge of grief and accommodations available to them, to allow them to make an informed decision about whether to apply for them.

Across these themes, the participants' concerns also appear to intersect between 'uniform' and 'autonomous' support when it comes to experiences of grief in higher education. This intersection could give rise to some troublesome areas where conflicting purposes and services arise. In relation to personal autonomy, participants expressed that they would like to have additional links specific to grief to highlight support services they can access, which emphasises each student's autonomy to access and receive support they may need. Yet, as highlighted in the theme "What students need," the participants also wanted staff and support services to be more proactive in providing support to students before they request assistance. The underlying difficulty here is that within higher education systems,

staff are unlikely to know who may be experiencing grief in the student population. This intersection is further complicated if the services are inadequate, or students narrowly define the role of the university in supporting their grief.

Some participants believed that university services are only for university-related issues. They described other students needing on-campus counselling for study-related concerns as being more important than their bereavement-related needs. Participants often described grief as being a normal and natural response and experience that might require support but not counselling. Without making it clear that there is a place for bereavement and grief within student services, combined with students' beliefs that they do not need counselling or that counselling would be unhelpful, barriers for accessing services are created and it becomes difficult for students and staff to recognise and respond to bereaved students' needs (Cox et al., 2015). Additionally, studies show that, although few bereaved students access campus counselling, they tend to describe family and friends as more helpful than formal supports (Tan & Andriessen, 2021; Varga et al., 2021a).

Those participants who did engage with the on-campus counselling service for support found it difficult to access. Participants reported that bereavement was not considered an emergency or issue that required urgent care. This may be because the counselling services do not include grief as central to their remit (Cupit et al., 2016; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). With university counselling primarily providing support related to symptoms of anxiety or depression, grief and loss may be mislabelled or misunderstood within this context, which may have been reinforced by receiving responses from administration staff that portrayed bereavement was not a 'good enough' reason to request a lengthy extension. This further highlights the lack of visibility of and responsiveness to grief-related concerns by the university system and processes. The experiences of participants in the present study and recent research, as outlined above, highlight how bereaved students can feel uncared for and

overlooked by the university system and perceive the system to be unhelpful (Cox et al., 2015; Cupit et al., 2016; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020).

Based on findings, the university system can tailor supports, services, processes, and procedures based on the student experiences and feedback found in this study so that students' needs during bereavement are more likely to be met (Cox et al., 2015; Cupit et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2021; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). These offerings can range from providing psychoeducation to students and administrative and lecturing staff relating to the grief process and information on how to support students experiencing grief (e.g., Balk et al., 2010; Lipp & O'Brien, 2020; Varga et al., 2021b), through to developing clearer processes and support for students to access and receive help. The Dual Process Model ([DPM] Stroebe & Schut, 1999), which articulates that grieving individuals oscillate between the loss and restoration (immersion in other tasks), may serve as an overarching frame to guide universities to design their support services by concurrently acknowledging students' losses and facilitating students' focus on their re-investment in their studies.

These findings support recent research regarding the utility of a student bereavement leave policy (Cupit et al., 2016; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020). Liew and Servaty-Seib (2020) identified that students accessed the student bereavement leave policy so that they did not have to worry about missing class work, had time for death-related activities and time with family, and felt cared for by the university. Liew and Servaty-Seib (2020) outlined student suggestions for improving the student bereavement leave policy, which were aligned with the feedback and suggestions given by their participants. Documentation evidencing the death, flexibility and allowances for individual circumstances, lack of communication between staff, one point of contact who liaised with staff, the need for the university to reach out following

the student's return to campus, the need for information, academic assistance, and emotional support, and training for staff were all commonalities identified by students.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings from our research should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. First, it is acknowledged that there was an over-representation of white Australians and women in the present study, yet similar limitations are observed in previous studies on university student bereavement (e.g., Balk et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2015; Cupit et al., 2021; Lipp & O'Brien, 2020). The small sample also prevented analyses concerning time since death and cause of death. Although this study was small and limited in diversity, it allowed the ability to explore whether differences exist within the same cultural group. A strength of the present study was the diversity in participants' ages, levels of study, and forms of study, but the small sample limited the exploration of need between age groups (i.e., due to different life stages), undergraduate and postgraduate students, and on-campus and online students. It is important for future research to understand cultural influences on university students' grief experiences so that university systems can meet the needs of bereaved culturally diverse students.

Those students who participated in this study were coping and functioning well enough to talk about their bereavement experiences. The present study and previous research do not capture the experiences of students who struggle or have withdrawn from university because of bereavement. Previous research has also recognised the difficulty in engaging those students who have struggled most with grief while studying (Balk et al., 2010). The experiences of students who study online are not represented in the literature, and this study has shown that online students have different needs and require different support to students who study on-campus. Future research could explicitly focus on the experience and needs of online students in such studies.

It is also important for future research to investigate the perspectives of academic and administrative staff to understand the practicalities and level of staff advocacy for implementing a range of policies and processes to support bereaved students, and to understand how informed and confident academic staff perceive themselves to be to provide such support to bereaved university students. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to compound grief experiences irrespective of the cause of death (Breen et al., 2021). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the experiences and needs of grieving students in higher education might also be compounded by factors such as distance learning, physical distancing from support networks, and increased anxiety (Unger & Meiran, 2020) and that these issues will also need to be addressed by university counselling services.

Despite the limitations of the present study and the avenues indicated for future research, the unique nature of this study has produced novel understandings about the experiences of university students as they navigate tertiary studies while bereaved. These findings make a significant contribution to the literature base regarding support needs for bereaved university students within an Australian context.

Conclusion

Bereavement and grief impact the ability to perform academically. There are several ways university systems can support bereaved students to navigate their tertiary studies, process their grief, and continue to have positive experiences of university following bereavement. The experiences of bereaved students across a diverse range of ages, levels of study, and format of study, are unique. However, the needs of bereaved students within the context of a university system are similar. Participants identified the need for their experiences to be validated, seen, and cared for by the university and the need for clear policies and procedures. Australian universities are currently lacking in clear policies that

could assist bereaved students to successfully navigate tertiary studies while processing one

of the most common, painful, and life-changing human experiences.

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Appendix: Interview Schedule

Can you tell me more about the loss of your daughter/father/grandmother?
Since the death, what has your university experience been like?
    Did your study habits change? Were there any changes in your grades?
Since the death, how did your priorities with respect to university change?
    Did university become more or less meaningful to you?

Did you feel comfortable discussing your loss with university peers?

How did your peers respond? How did your peers support you?

When you were experiencing the most difficulties with your loss, did you talk to any of your lecturers or tutors? What was this experience like for you?

Did you request any extensions for assessments or exams? What was this experience like for you?

What support did you receive from the university?

     How would you like this process or support to be different?

     What more would you have liked or needed from the university to support you?

What suggestions do you have for how universities can respond to and help bereaved students?

Demographic Questions:

What is your current age?

Do you identify as male, female, or other?

How would you describe your ethnicity?

Are you currently enrolled in an undergraduate or postgraduate degree?

Which School of study are you enrolled in?

What degree are you currently studying?

How long have you been studying?

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity[a]	Deceased	Area of Study; Degree	Format of Study	Length of Time Studying	Applied for Extensions or Withdrawals
1	40	M	White	Grandmother	Professional Writing and Publishing; Undergraduate	Online, part-time	6 years	Yes
2	35	F	White	Daughter	Education; Undergraduate	Online, part-time	9 years	Yes
3	40	F	Caucasian	Father-in-law, Uncle	Psychology; Graduate	On campus, part-time	4 years	Yes
4	36	F	Caucasian	Grandmother	Human Biology); Undergraduate	On campus, full-time	18 months	No
5	24	F	Australian	Father-in-law	Nutrition and Food Science; Undergraduate	On campus, full-time	6 months	No
6	24	F	Caucasian	Father	Food Science and Technology; Graduate	On campus, full-time	5 years	No
7	43	F	Anglo-Caucasian	Father, Grandfather	Human Resource Management; Undergraduate	On campus, full-time	18 months	Yes

8	67	F	Anglo-Australian	Mother-in-law, Sister-in-law, Mother, Daughter	Librarianship and Information Management; Undergraduate	Online, part-time	7 years	Yes
9	46	F	Caucasian	Unborn child	Psychology; Undergraduate	On campus, full-time	2 years	Yes
10	60	F	UK/Australian	Father	Arts; Undergraduate	Online, full-time, part-time	18 months	Yes
11	56	F	Australian	Mother	Psychology; Graduate	On campus, full-time, part-time	18 months	No
12	42	M	Bits of everything	Grandmother, Grandmother	Metallurgy; Undergraduate	Online, part-time	8 years	No

Note. [a] Terms reflect the ways participants indicated their own ethnicity.