

‘TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY’

Information for

Commencing Undergraduate

Non School-leaver Students¹, Partners and Families

Transition:

- *a period of significant adjustment, development and change affecting all spheres of students’ lives;*
- *progression through an educational institution where the balance of responsibility for achievement rests with students;*
- *enculturation into the teaching and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and culture of the university; and*
- *engagement with the university, faculty, course, and people at a specific campus.*

For most students, the prospect of attending university for the first time as a non school-leaver is exciting and stimulating. For some students who may be less assertive and confident, it may also be a time of self-doubt, unease and awkwardness – these feelings may be compounded easily if the home environment is unsupportive. Before starting their course, non school-leaver students tend not to give much thought to issues of transition to university. More often than not, most non school-leaver students believe that transition issues are neither relevant nor likely to affect them; for many, the only perceived hurdle to success in the tertiary environment is their extended absence from formal education. These views are sometimes reinforced by two common misconceptions regarding transition to university:

- issues of transition to university relate to, and affect, only school-leaver students; and
- qualities that non school-leaver students possess, e.g., maturity, “life” experience, focus, motivation, commitment, desire to succeed, etc., make them resistant to being affected by issues of transition.

In reality, transition to university is challenging for *all* students. Non school-leaver students will not only share many experiences of transition to university with their school-leaver student peers, but also have to contend with additional issues that affect only this group of students new to university study.

Challenges for all students

First-year undergraduate students share common feelings of initial unease, but do not often openly admit to these. Particularly in the early weeks of university, it is common for students to feel:

- alone, especially if they do not know anyone else attending their campus of Monash, and are not familiar with the campus, and the way it operates;
- uneasy, if they do not understand fully their course structure, including its options and limitations;
- apprehensive, as it may appear that everyone else knows what to do, where to go and how things work;
- anxious about where and how to meet people, develop friendships and establish new networks in a large university where few, if any, other students are known to them;
- at a disadvantage, when unfamiliar terminology is used, e.g., “major” and “minor” sequence, “unit/s of study”, “faculty”, “discipline”, etc.;
- concerned that styles of learning and teaching differ from previous school experience;
- disappointed, perhaps even bored, at the slow pace in units of study (subjects) which had prerequisite subjects where content has already been covered;
- intimidated by the amount of reading and written work that has to be completed in a relatively short period of time – 13 weeks;
- unsure of what is expected in lectures, tutorials, practicals, etc., and even the appropriate way to address teaching staff such as lecturers and tutors;
- worried about letting down themselves and their family, especially if they are the first in the family to attend university;
- homesick, if relocation has been necessary in order to study; and
- unsupported, especially if they do not know where, and to whom, to turn for reassurance, advice and assistance.

Additional challenges for non school-leaver students

- limited range of suitable programmes during Orientation tailored specifically for non school-leaver students;

¹ Traditionally referred to as mature age students

- immediate necessity for advanced computer literacy;
- attendance on a part-time basis, making engagement more difficult;
- lack of confidence in communicative competence regarding academic writing and oral presentations;
- heightened awareness that time is precious – every minute for non school-leaver students needs to “count”;
- ambiguous interaction with staff – “equality” of closeness in age can be negated by the teacher/student power relation;
- ambivalent interaction and integration with school-leaver students within and beyond the classroom;
- fear of ostracism and humiliation by school-leaver students – especially due to age, and managing study and assessment tasks once again;
- partner and/or family response to the student’s desire to return to study;
- need to convince partner and/or family that study is “work”;
- friends’ response to the student’s desire to return to study;
- employer and work colleague response to the student’s desire to return to study; and
- increased financial pressure due to the likely relinquishment of full-time, paid employment.

University can be confronting. The sheer size of some campuses, their diverse communities, the competitive academic environment, and differences in teaching and learning styles, university life, procedures, culture and institutional practices can be intimidating for many new students. While it is true that factors of transition to university will be a common, shared experience for significant numbers of students, not all students will have the *same* transition. The ways in which transition is managed, and the time it takes to adjust to the university expectations of first-year, undergraduate students, will depend very much on qualities of the individual. Numerous factors: personality type, state of mind, coping strategies, interpersonal skills and communicative competence, as well as intelligence, preferred learning style/s, prior academic achievement, maturity, flexibility, motivation, commitment, desire to succeed and perseverance, play a significant role in determining the type of transition experience that students have and the speed with which adjustment to university is made.

A smooth transition to university depends on how successfully and quickly students can negotiate “social transition” and “academic transition”. Social transition refers to engagement with *people*, i.e., meeting new peers, developing friendships and forming networks with others, and the *place*, i.e., the university, campus, faculty/faculties and departments. Academic transition involves adjusting to the teaching and learning styles, and the culture of the university; as well as their ability to maintain balance, between: freedom and responsibility, competing “life” and different course demands, and taking responsibility for initiating interaction with staff.

Social transition underpins academic transition. If students do not create new networks of friends and peers (to share learning experiences and university life) they can feel disconnected from the university. Other issues, such as: the speed with which students establish networks, familiarise themselves with the physical environment, adapt to the ways of the university and to different teaching styles, and appreciate that the nature of independent learning is determined largely by having realistic expectations of university, will determine how well these challenges are managed by students once they are at university. All of these factors affect students’ ease and hastening of adjustment, sense of belonging, integration, satisfaction, academic achievement, and overall positive experience of university.

Orientation

Orientation plays a crucial role in the initial engagement of students. Today at Monash, Orientation has more of an academic focus than in the past. Faculties are expected to develop programmes to better suit the profile of their entire commencing student body, and assist first-year, undergraduate students’ fit into the university community. In addition to providing useful course and faculty information, activities are designed to assist students’ orientation to the physical environment of the faculty and university. A balance of social and academic activities enables new students to engage purposefully and quickly with the university. Most beneficial for non school-leaver students are activities or structured workshops in the areas of computer literacy and academic skill development, e.g., note-taking in lectures, academic writing and giving oral presentations; they provide practical ways of introducing students to these vital skills.

Computer literacy

For the majority of non school-leaver students starting university, the need for immediate computer literacy is perhaps the single biggest hurdle to successful progress. At Monash, aside from initial enrolment in first-year, all other administrative procedures are conducted on-line, including: re-enrolment, changes to personal and course details, accessing results, etc. In addition, many units of study use varying degrees of information technology (IT) literacy, e.g., Web CT, on-line lectures, submission of work via file attachment, undertaking tests on-line, class-based discussion forums, uploading materials onto the web, etc., and communicating with staff electronically via e-mail.

Being able to manage comfortably the IT demands placed on students by the university is a necessity to rapid integration into the Monash community.

Part-time attendance

The common combination of being a non school-leaver student *and* attending university part-time is the most significant point of difference between non school-leaver students and school-leaver students. This combination has widespread ramifications that impact on every aspect of studying at university, particularly the selection of units of study, and engagement with the university.

Part-time attendance by students influences significantly selection of non-core units of study. Students with commitments such as work, children, elderly and/or ailing family members, etc., are often restricted as to subject choices. Subject selection for non school-leaver students is often made according to the availability of classes at times that allow for other commitments to be met rather than on the basis of genuine interest.

Spending limited time at university can affect adversely students' potential to engage with the institution in all sorts of ways. Non school-leaver and/or part-time students are particularly susceptible to lack of engagement because of their intermittent connection with the university. When presence at university is limited only to class attendance, the opportunity to identify with university "life" is lost. Moreover, students in such circumstances do not have the time and/or interest to meet peers and develop learning communities which limits their support network at university.

Being on campus for limited time makes it difficult to become enculturated quickly into the teaching and learning styles, institutional practices, and culture of the university, which can compound the academic challenges faced by first-year, non school-leaver students.

Support networks beyond the university – family, friends and work colleagues

The return to study of non school-leaver students invariably generates mixed reactions amongst family members, friends and work colleagues. Responses vary from fervent encouragement to blatant mockery. The response of, and support from, family members – particularly partners and children – is largely dependent on:

- the value placed on education in general, and specifically higher education;
- understanding the student's motivation for returning to study;
- level of comfort felt by family members in the student seeking self improvement/fulfilment through tertiary study;
- extent of inconvenience to which the family unit will be subjected; and
- degree of financial difficulty to be experienced by the family unit.

Factors that govern the home environment play a very significant role in the transition to university of non school-leaver students. Returning students with a supportive home environment will be best placed to succeed. If family members understand the student's decision to return to study, are interested in the "journey", and appreciate that it will impact on the entire family unit – by acknowledging that course completion is likely to take substantial time, and they will need to be flexible and accommodate these changes – then the transition is likely to be successful. If not, then the considerable transition issues faced by the non school-leaver student returning to university will be magnified considerably.

Lack of support may be expressed in obvious and subtle ways through the behaviour of family members. Partners who themselves lack a high level of formal education are especially susceptible to feeling "threatened" by the decision of non school-leaver students (particularly females) to return to study; children, often unintentionally, contribute to the creation of an unsupportive home environment by complaining about the amount of time that study now consumes for the student/parent. Although such concerns are not entirely unfounded, it is when they used as emotional blackmail that they tend to be most destructive. Depending on the motivation, self-confidence and assertiveness of returning students, their interpretation of, and response to, such behaviour will determine their commitment and persistence.

The transition to university of non school-leaver students with families is especially difficult because it is not the journey of a solitary student, but a transition for, and with repercussions on, the entire family unit. In situations where the home environment is supportive, the student will have the opportunity to make the most of their university experience. However, if the family unit is unsupportive, despite the availability of substantial support from the university, the possibility of the non school-leaver student withdrawing from the course increases significantly.

Aside from family, friends outside university have a significant role to play in encouraging and supporting students to make a successful transition to university. This may be difficult, especially if the constraint of time means that contact is infrequent, and divergence in interests and direction creates the impression that there is less now than is common and shared. Healthy relationships, however, are not only likely to be maintained but also to be of mutual benefit.

The familiarity and stability provided by friends and family are grounding elements that offer support networks of infinite importance in the hectic, changing and challenging world of the first-year, undergraduate, non school-leaver student.

Employers and work colleagues too, can be either help or hindrance to the non school-leaver student. The workplace needs to be sensitive to the needs of students, particularly at times of assessment task submission and examinations. Often, work colleagues offer little support and encouragement to non school-leaver students because they feel intimidated by, and/or envious of, the prospective advancement of their colleague. For employers, the situation is even more testing when non school-leaver students undertaking tertiary study to improve their qualifications. Employers are fearful that no longer satisfied with the *status quo*, the employee may seek either an increase in pay or alternative employment. Neither scenario is a particularly attractive proposition for the employer. Facing such prospects, few employers actively encourage employees to undertake tertiary study. However, in instances where employers value highly the attributes of particular employees and obtaining formal qualifications would benefit not only the individual but also the firm, such individuals are encouraged to undertake tertiary study and provided with generous time allowance to do so – some even receive tuition subsidies – in such cases, the employer earns eternal gratitude and loyalty.

Support networks at university – fellow students and staff

At university, students have most in common with their fellow classmates, because they share the experience of lectures, tutorials, etc., and form support networks and “communities of learners” (study groups). Through this interaction, students can share their understanding of course content and issues of adjustment to university, making the transition process more rapid. Such communities or learners are the preferred option for non school-leaver students’ interaction with their peers because they are task-oriented and an efficient means of utilising time effectively between classes. In addition, the assistance, guidance, encouragement and emotional support group members offer one another increases their persistence through the camaraderie established; these informal networks also assist students through enhanced engagement with the university.

Another source of fellow student support for non school-leaver students is the Mature Age and Part-time Students’ Association. An obvious benefit to be gained through interacting with other non school-leaver students is that they are able to identify easily with issues that affect all non school-leaver students; as such they are well placed to understand and empathise with any difficulties that can arise and provide the encouragement to counteract these.

Non school-leaver students at times encounter difficulties in interacting with staff because although their closeness in age may give the impression of increased commonality, this is not necessarily so, especially when the power relation of teacher/student is taken into account. Students who presume too much familiarity with staff are often disappointed when their efforts to befriend staff are not reciprocated.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Academic Transition

1. How many units of study (subjects) are studied in first-year?

Full-time students are expected to undertake four units of study each semester in first-year, i.e., eight units of study for the year. For part-time students, the number of units of study will be *pro-rata* per semester.

2. How many hours of face-to-face teaching are there in first-year?

This varies significantly between faculties. It depends very much on the nature of the discipline and the method of teaching, e.g., faculties that require students to undertake laboratory work, studio work or practicals have more contact hours than other faculties.

Irrespective of whether the majority of time is spent in class or independent study outside class, the number of hours students need to commit to their studies will be the same for all courses.

3. How many hours should be spent on private study?

This will very much depend on the individual student but also on the course being studied (see above). Some courses have extensive reading to be undertaken in preparation for class as well as for the completion of assigned assessment tasks, other courses focus on practical application of the discipline content.

Full-time students are expected to commit to 40 hours of study per week, per semester during teaching and examination periods. For part-time students, the number of hours of study will be *pro-rata* per unit.

4. What is the nature of learning at university?

Students at university are expected to be “independent learners”. For this reason, learning at university generally has the following characteristics:

- responsibility rests with the student (lecturers present material and tutors discuss material with students; students themselves are responsible for reaching an understanding of the course content);
- content is covered at a rapid rate, generally without repetition for reinforcement;
- contact with, and support from, teaching staff is limited unless sought specifically; students are advised to meet informally with their peers in small study groups;
- guidance for assessment tasks may be limited, e.g., detailed criteria for assessment tasks are not always provided; and
- draft work is not accepted for review by staff prior to final submission of assessable work.

5. When do students find out the assessment set for each unit of study?

All students are provided with this information by the end of the first week of semester. Early notification of assessment requirements and due dates is provided to students to enable them to manage their time effectively by prioritising and forward planning.

Many assessment tasks fall due in the latter part of the semester, and often several assessment tasks are likely to be due at about the same time, so time management is crucial.

6. Who is the most appropriate person to consult if I am experiencing difficulty with a unit of study?

It is important for all students to take action quickly if they are experiencing difficulty with units of study because the university semester is only thirteen weeks – it can fly past very quickly and unless help is sought immediately it may be too late for any possibility of remediation.

The most appropriate person to consult in the first instance is the tutor/demonstrator of the unit of study. This person will discuss the issue (and options) with the student; the student will then be in a position to make an informed decision on the most appropriate course of action.

7. Who is the most appropriate person to consult if I am experiencing difficulty with my course?

The most appropriate person is the “academic adviser” of the faculty. This individual is best able to provide detailed guidance on the options available – dependent upon the specific course being undertaken.

Again, it is important to remember that time is of the essence. Use the first few weeks to gauge interest and suitability for a course. Students should always consult the faculty academic adviser before taking any action regarding course change.

8. Can I make changes to my course?

In courses that do not have “core” (compulsory) units of study, it may be possible to change units of study. This decision should be made early in the semester to make “picking up” another unit of study a viable proposition. This is not an advisable option after the first two weeks.

Students who decide to “drop” a unit of study should withdraw officially before March 31 to avoid payment of the CSP (formerly HECS) fee and having the unit recorded on their academic transcript as either “withdrawn” or “fail” depending on the time of the withdrawal.

9. What should I do if I am ill/will be absent?

It is important to contact all tutors/demonstrators to alert them to any absence (preferably beforehand). If the period of absence is likely to be extended, it is advisable to also contact the faculty’s academic adviser who may recommend applying for “Leave of Absence”.

If due dates for assessment tasks will be missed as a consequence of absence it is crucial for the student to have made either prior arrangements for late submission of work or to have been advised of alternate arrangements so that the final grade will not be affected adversely.

If a student’s academic performance has been affected by unforeseeable circumstances, e.g., ill health – short or long term, bereavement, trauma, etc., it is advisable to contact tutors/demonstrators to inform them. If a student’s academic performance is likely to be affected for an extended period, then it is in the student’s interests to complete and submit to the Faculty Office an application for “Special Consideration”.

The “Special Consideration” application form states: “A candidate whose work during a teaching period or whose performance in an examination or other assessment has been affected by illness or other serious cause, may

apply in writing for special consideration by the examiners or board of examiners concerned. Serious causes include:

- **serious illness or psychological condition** – e.g., hospital admission, serious injury, severe asthma, severe anxiety or depression. *Does not include minor illness such as a mild cold.*
- **loss or bereavement** – e.g., death of close family member, family/relationship breakdown
- **hardship/trauma** – e.g., victim of crime, sudden loss of income or employment, severe disruption to domestic arrangements.”

10. Can my parents/family members contact the university to enquire about my enrolment status, fees, progress and/or results?

No. The university’s Confidentiality Policy prohibits information about students being released to any other persons, including parents (even if they are paying students’ fees) and/or other family members.

Social Transition

11. I do not know anyone else studying at Monash, how can I go about meeting people?

Students should start meeting new people and developing friendships that will become important support networks as soon as possible. All first-year students are expected to attend Orientation. During this time, a range of social activities and academic programs are offered to enable students to make a good start to their university studies. At this time, they will be encouraged to attend Host Scheme, faculty and other camps, and join a number of different Clubs and Societies – these avenues present an excellent means of making new connections. Once classes have commenced, students should also arrange to get together with their peers taking classes in common to discuss their work in “communities of learners” which assists in the development of friendships.

12. Why is there such an emphasis on “meeting people” when students start university?

Meeting people and developing friendships, especially through subject-based study groups, helps students create valuable support networks at university. Fellow students can offer reassurance, comfort and even practical assistance in times of need, as well as celebrate achievements.

13. If I am experiencing difficulty adjusting to university, where can I seek assistance?

Where to turn for assistance will very much depend on the type of difficulty being experienced. For issues affecting units of study, the tutor/demonstrator is a good starting point. Changes to units of study/courses are best discussed with faculty academic advisers (see above). Issues to do with academic writing should be directed to Language and Learning Services http://www.celts.monash.edu.au/html/language_and_academic_skills_s.html The Student Services Centre can assist with matters related to ID cards, fees, student enrolment details and travel concessions. University Community Services (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/commerv/>) deal with a broad range of issues, including counselling, housing, financial advice, chaplaincy, etc., and Monash Student Employment and Careers Service (<http://www-monseacs.adm.monash.edu.au/>) assists students with career planning, advice and employment.

12. What support and assistance can I get if I have a disability?

Students with a disability that requires special support and assistance to help them complete their tertiary education need to *register* with the Disability Liaison Unit (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/sss/pc/equity/dlu/>).

Once this has been done, the DLU will be responsible for making all necessary arrangements to support students and offer assistance with learning.

15. What sort of issues am I likely to encounter starting university?

Numerous transition issues have already been identified above; some further aspects of university life about which there are common misconceptions or to which students may not have given much thought appear below.

One such notion is that studying at university is stimulating and fulfilling because all students at university are here through choice. This is not necessarily the case, as individual motivation for studying at university differs for each student. Although many students do find studying at university stimulating and fulfilling, others do not; some students find that the reality of university study does not meet their expectations and initial enthusiasm quickly fades. For others: work pressures may not permit course enjoyment, exhaustion may be the outcome of many years of continuous study, they may be studying a course that was imposed on them, or may not have got their first preference, etc. The reasons can be as numerous as the number of students studying at university. Irrespective of the reason, it is important to know that not all students may be as excited to be studying at university as you.

Another common expectation is that “meeting people and making friends” will be easy at university. Despite being a common first-year expectation, it is not always realised. Especially for non school-leaver students who may feel rather tentative about being at university and students from “sheltered” environments (e.g., single-sex schools, rural schools, independent schools – namely, schools that students have attended since childhood with the same set of friends) coming to university and having to make new friends can be quite a challenge after a lifetime of “maintaining” existing friendships.

Many students place themselves under considerable and undue stress by mistakenly believing that “independent learning” means that everything has to be done by students on their own. This is not so. It is important for students to know that if problems arise, help is available. Excellent university resources – services and facilities – are available for student use, but the responsibility rests with the student to seek out necessary assistance and/or access the service/s required. Students should spend time getting to know the university, its support services, resources and facilities. Sometimes, simply the opportunity to “talk things through” with someone familiar with the way the university operates, can reduce levels of stress and make even a seemingly impossible situation manageable.

Balancing competing “life” demands is perhaps the most common challenge for the majority of students. Considerable time and energy needs to be expended to ensure organisation and time management skills are utilised optimally. Prioritising and maintaining focus are important criteria to a successful start at university.

For further information, see: <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/expectations.html>, <http://www.monash.edu.au/orientation/>, <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/changes.html> and <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/similarities-differences.html>

Practical Considerations

16. What costs are involved in undertaking university study?

The main cost is the Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) formerly known as Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) liability incurred for each unit of study, see: <http://www.monash.edu.au/courses/fees.html> The university also charges “Amenities Fees” that students must pay, see: <http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/ugrad/ugrad6.html>

Further costs include text books and other incidental expenses associated with the course being studied, i.e., specialised equipment and supplies.

17. Does Monash provide on-campus health services?

The Berwick, Caulfield, Clayton and Peninsula campuses provide on-campus health services. All Australian residents holding a Medicare card are bulk-billed, thus making these services very convenient for students.

18. Does Monash provide sport and recreation facilities?

There are sport and recreation facilities at the Caulfield, Clayton, Gippsland, and Peninsula campuses.

Irrespective of students’ home campus, all students are entitled to use the sport and recreation facilities of Monash University. A comprehensive list is available at: <http://www.sport.monash.edu.au>

Involvement in sport and other recreational pursuits is a means of improving balance in students’ lives. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle and/or becoming part of a team sport help students immeasurably with academic study. Moreover, spending time on campus enhances the speed and prospect of making a successful transition to university.

19. How can I travel to Monash and between campuses?

A free shuttle bus service operates between Berwick and Caulfield campuses, Monash Medical Centre and Clayton campus. Students wishing to use this service can check availability of seats or obtain timetable information by contacting their respective Campus Centre information desk.

20. Is it safe to be on campus after dark if a student has evening classes?

Each campus has its own security arrangements. Useful information can be found at <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/security.html>

21. How can I obtain a “Parking Permit” for the Clayton campus?

Details on obtaining a “Parking Permit” for the Clayton campus can be found at:
<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/facserv/info/parking/>

Some useful web site resources

Monash Transition Program <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/>

Orientation 2005: <http://www.monash.edu.au/orientation/>

Glossary of acronyms <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/acronyms.html>

Glossary of terms <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/terms.html>

Principal dates <http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/handbooks/srg/srg0010.htm>

School-leaver students <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/school-leaver-students.html>

New students <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/new-students.html>

Information for international students <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/international-students.html>

Resources for students with ‘Special Needs’ and ‘Special Interests’
<http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/special-needs&interests.html>

Orientation <http://www.monash.edu.au/orientation/>

Other Useful Links <http://www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/useful-links.html>

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