Personal Adjustment: External influences and pressures on study, including the work and study balance

Issues relating to external influences/pressures

The issue “difficulty balancing study and other commitments” emerged as the most significant tick-box response across all sections of the survey, with a relatively low standard deviation. As the graph shows, 81% of all staff agreed that this was an important issue.

Along with the work/study balance, mental, physical and family health was seen to be a significant external factor that influenced personal adjustment. Notable issues of this kind included mental health problems, childcare and other parental responsibility issues, physical illness, personal or family tragedies, and specific mental and emotional issues, like “emotional problems from forming sexual relationships when still immature” and “students with problems often expressed as depression, fatigue, and anxiety” (teaching staff respondent)

Another significant area that staff identified was the geographic relocation of students from rural/remote areas (including international students), and the issues associated with this transition.

“Relocation from rural / remote areas, interstate and from overseas - e.g. seeking accommodation and understanding associated responsibilities; establishing new networks of service providers - banks, credit unions, doctors, dentists etc; obtaining driving licence & insurance; Understanding entitlement to and arranging to receive Centrelink entitlements; establishing sporting, hobbies and social networks. Access to affordable child care services, particularly difficult for single parent families. Establishing social & support networks for the families of (typically) postgraduate students arriving from overseas. For students with religious convictions, finding a new congregation and / or opportunities to pray and pursue their beliefs.” (Centralised support respondent)
Typical responses to external personal issues

Responses to these issues are varied. On the one hand, they are seen as external, personal issues that are not the responsibility or business of university staff. On the other hand, they are recognised by staff as having a significant effect on students’ study and engagement with the university culture. Some staff see the responsibility for these issues lying solely with the support staff at the university, while others see most staff (including teaching staff) as needing to take on some part of the responsibility.

Some respondents saw it as their responsibility to point students in the direction of an appropriate support. This is a common response for someone who thinks that these issues are not their area of knowledge or responsibility, provided that the support is actually in place, and that the staff member knows to point the student in its direction. The awareness of central support mechanisms within the Faculties is essential to this mode of referral-support, as is the ability for central supports to be able to handle all referrals.

Staff who saw the provision of support as part of their professional role emphasized the need to make students feel connected with their learning community, as well as the need for all staff members to be able to identify students who are in need of support.

Some teaching staff did provide direct, one-on-one support, typically in the form of course advising, the provision of information, and having an “open door” policy.
“I have an open door policy, friendly approach, try to demystify the ‘lecturer’” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Discuss work versus study obligations and management individually with students.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Talk to and advise students who seem isolated or need support with work/study balance.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“I am aware that personal problems do occur, and whilst I consider that these are none of my business, when I observe that students are "not themselves", I endeavour diplomatically to let them know that I’m aware they’re perhaps not coping as well as they’d like.” (Teaching staff respondent)

**Specific Initiatives that seek to engage with students’ external personal transition issues**

**Initiative that “could be done” – staff training in personal adjustment issues**

*Having intermittent focus sessions for staff - academic and general on how to approach, teach and liaise and assist these students. I've been to some brilliant sessions to show staff what it is actually like having a disability or being from a different part of the world. Placing people in other peoples’ shoes is amazing.*

Faculty support respondent, School of Population Health

**Initiative – compulsory class attendance to address personal engagement**

*My school’s first year unit is very supportive of students and it is only in subsequent years that students are aware of the help they received in 1st year. Compulsory attendance at labs and assessment during the semester seems to have helped with academic issues. It has also brought forward many other issues in students' lives about why they couldn't attend etc. that can then be dealt with appropriately rather than left.*

Faculty support respondent, Anatomy and Human Biology

**Initiative – returning assessment in a way that is sensitive to students' personal feelings.**

*If I have to hand out assignments one particular lecturer privately lets me know if any of the students have done badly. Then, quietly I can hand out assignments to those particular students in a way that privately and without fuss ‘saves face’ for them, and retains confidentiality. So many come up in groups and asks ‘what did you get?’ It’s quite devastating for the poorer student.*

Faculty Support respondent, Medicine and Dentistry

**Initiative – In-faculty surveying on first year experience**

*This year we have begun a longitudinal survey which will be used to improve the first year program in Engineering, and their understanding of what their course/degree is supposed to help them achieve. This survey will be used as the foundation for a*
mentoring program, where first year students are mentored by fourth year students to orient at university.

Faculty support respondent, Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts