Academic Adjustment: Adjusting to a new, independent learning style

Issues with independent learning

The tick-box responses to issues of this nature were varied across the staff types. The broader statement “difficulty adjusting to a new independent learning style” was the most significant to all staff, particularly Faculty support staff, to whom it was the most significant tick-box issue in the survey. Interestingly, students not having a clear idea about what is expected of them academically was seen by all staff to be considerably more significant than students’ ability to handle their study workloads.

In general, staff viewed the lack of independent learning experiences within the high school environment as having a detrimental effect on learning skills when students entered university. Typical issues with relation to independent learning included:

- Inexperience at setting goals and deadlines;
- Difficulties keeping up with the volume of reading required;
- Lack of understanding about how to prepare for and succeed in exams;
- Difficulties managing their time;
- Problems with stress and anxiety impacting on their studies.

“The transition for students from School to University is greatly influenced by whether they have been taught to take responsibility for their own paths. Many students rely on things to be done for them, including the thinking to be done for them. Quite often notices/instructions are neither read nor heeded.” (Faculty support respondent)

“Difficulty adjusting to the flexibility and independence of a uni environment.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Many students have difficulty adjusting to the fact that they need to be self-disciplined and self-motivating, where at school the discipline has been imposed.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Some FY students with very high expectations of their performance struggle with their perceived lack of success.” (Centralised support respondent)
Staff also perceived a lack of information provided to students about university learning processes to have a significant impact on students who struggle with independent learning. The effective provision of this information was seen to be the best solution for these students. (see “typical responses” below)

“Not understanding the penalties in relation to late work or incomplete work.” (Faculty support respondent)

“Juggling work load during the first load of exams.” (Faculty support respondent)

“Difficulty understanding some lecturers' teaching styles.” (Faculty support respondent)

“Plagiarism rules and use of the internet as a source for assignments.” (Faculty support respondent)

“Problems with timetable clashes when in combined degrees and not having confidence to sort it.” (Faculty support respondent)

There were several significant issues to do with classroom behaviour. Some students find the transition to appropriate University classroom behaviour difficult, with a perceived lack of respect for the independent learning context. This manifested into classroom behaviour that was agreed to be disruptive to good learning processes…

Staff also identified a cohort of students that found it difficult to engage within tutorial and lecture contexts due to a lack of self confidence. Large classes, cultural differences and peer intimidation were identified as contributing to a classroom environment where students who were often shy would find it difficult to engage in discussion.

“Adjusting to an environment which they control i.e. there's no teacher standing over them telling them what to do and when. Adjusting to lack of face-to-face classes.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Some students demonstrated great difficulty sitting quietly and attentively in a lecture. This seemed to demonstrate difficulty between making the transition between being in a classroom with a teacher and attending a lecture.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Lack of respect for teachers and colleagues (disruptions in lectures / labs etc)” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Lab safety, i.e. students are found eating and drinking and gum chewing during laboratory classes.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Students lack self confidence to answer questions in lectures. Some even miss lectures because they cannot find the venues.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Difficulty in adjusting to the informality of an Australian tutorial and the expectation that one's own opinions are worth expressing, and are encouraged (OS students in particular, but not exclusively)” (Teaching staff respondent)

“Students also often feel overwhelmed, particularly in large classes (usually lectures) and are sometimes hesitant to speak in tutorials because of shyness and unfamiliarity with topics.” (Teaching staff respondent)

“First year students (school age entry) can be intimidated by mature age students. This reduces them to silence in a tutorial setting, even if they have a reasonable grasp of the material.” (Teaching staff respondent)
Typical responses to independent learning issues

"The transition to Uni studying is part of growing up. I think it is something that students have to get through by themselves. Our obligation should be restricted to providing clear information about what is expected of them academically.” (Teaching staff respondent)

"I think it is very important that the students are provided with a list of concepts they should be familiar with and capable of understanding upon completion of their unit. If they are no longer getting all the information they need for a course from their course material then they need to know what they should be looking for elsewhere.” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Clear and explicit assessment guidelines greatly assist students in helping them understand what is expected of them academically and should be standard across all faculties (but don't seem to be).” (Centralised support response).

"Continuously specifying what is ‘expected’ ” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Discussion of expectations in tutorials.” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Delivering lectures or tutorials, clearly articulate the outcomes to be achieved.” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Discuss expectations in tutorials.” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Try and spell out our academic expectations in handouts and classes.” (Teaching staff respondent)

There were 16 responses that were similar to these ones listed – Staff who sought to clarify course expectations and outcomes for students.

"I try to encourage students to learn by understanding concepts rather than memorising and constantly refer to new sources of information, such as the internet, they can use to better understand their topics. This encourages active learning rather than relying on everything given to them by lecturers” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Promote the different learning environment - students are independent and are encouraged to communicate directly with academic staff.” (Centralised support respondent, initiative that “could be done”) 

"Suggest in handouts and tutorials some tips for independent work, for example explaining how much time to devote to each subject and different aspects of each subject.” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Already I do my best to communicate the idea - gently, diplomatically, and unaggressively - that lectures and tutes are not the only sources of information; that students should do at least some preparation for each tutorial (and not forget to bring the textbook); that we educate professional people (we don’t "train" them)” (Teaching staff respondent)

"Place laboratory rules in laboratories to alert them that eating, drinking, gum chewing is unsafe in a laboratory and that wearing of closed shoes and lab coats is asked for.” (Faculty support respondent)

Initiatives that sought to encourage and foster independent thinking and learning were also in abundance, particularly from teaching staff. This included providing info about appropriate classroom behaviour.
The need to maintain small tutorial group sizes is particularly prevalent amongst responses, and is an obvious way to improve and foster independent learning.

Specific Initiatives that seek to engage with students’ independent learning issues

Initiatives that seek to assist students who struggle academically

Allow students who fail their 1st assignment in the unit to revise and resubmit it with a maximum mark of 50%.

Teaching staff respondent, School of Economics and Commerce

Ask them to submit essays before they are due to point areas that need more work (a work in progress).

Teaching staff respondent, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

When marking, I believe in engaging with students’ ideas, but often the number of technical faults (grammar, poor referencing, lack of understanding of academic writing etc) gets in the way. So I prepared a sheet with numbered comments about common errors (‘it’s’ not ‘it’s’) etc. When I come to a problem corresponding to one of these numbered points in a student’s essay, I highlight the problem and place a number next to it in the margin, and attach the sheet to the essay when I return it to the student. That way, I can still spend the time responding to the student’s ideas, but students are still receiving feedback on the technicalities of writing.

Teaching staff respondent, School of Social and Cultural Studies

Hand back essays in interviews of 15-30 minutes, marking and explaining errors in English as well as discussing the construction and thought of each essay.

Teaching staff respondent, School of Humanities
I normally remind students of as much as I can of what they need to know and it is my practice to write to all first year students who fail to hand in a piece of assessment. This is very productive.

Teaching staff respondent, School of Humanities

Initiative that “could be done” – A scheduled one-on-one meeting with their unit tutor after 3 weeks of semester to inquire about their progress. This would provide them with a more personal experience and an opportunity to identify any issues. Give them a chance to feel that someone does know who they are and is interested in their well being and progress

Teaching staff respondent, School of Economics and Commerce

Initiative that “could be done” - “A one stop advice shop for students panicking with assignments (this could be 'manned' or 'personned' by staff and maybe postgrads trained to help 'solve the problem' quickly - obviously with more staff on roster at really busy times like pre-exams etc.)"

Teaching staff respondent, School of Social and Cultural Studies

Initiative – Assessment method to assist students' academic adjustment

Lots of continuous assessment (online tests, lab quizzes) at approximately 2-3 week intervals provides continuous feedback as to progress.

Teaching staff respondent, School of Anatomy and Human Biology

Initiatives that “could be done” – Provision of course information

Open access to all unit material on the web to anybody, so prospective students can see the sort of thing they will be learning.

Faculty support respondent, Natural and Agricultural Sciences
Give the students SAMPLES of work from the academic staff on format, content and 
types within each unit. Each faculty has a kit showing them ‘how to survive’ each 
particular unit.

Faculty support respondent, Medicine and Dentistry

Initiative that “could be done” – Coordinated approach to course organisation

More communication between schools and discipline groups would be useful. e.g. 1. 
to arrange essay due dates to be staggered. 2. to discuss more generic skills, like 
essay writing.

Teaching staff respondent, Arts, Humanities and Social 
 Sciences

Initiative that seeks to inform students about transition, via older students

Talk by level two and three students about how to adjust to university life - including 
simple academic matters such as what stationary to buy.

Teaching staff respondent, Health Science

Initiative – providing transition information in hard format

The faculty office produces a first year survival guide together with Life and Physical 
Sciences to answer some of these issues for students.

Faculty support respondent, Faculty of Natural and 
 Agricultural Sciences

Initiative that seeks to address plagiarism

We include a plagiarism statement on our cover sheets which students must sign and 
attach to their work.

Faculty support respondent, Arts, Humanities and 
 Social Sciences