**Project aim:** To investigate the gaps between student and staff expectations and experiences at university.

- Nearly 17,000 students were surveyed at the three major universities in South Australia over 2010-2012.
- As a teacher of first-year university students, you play a critical role in setting up students for success over the course of their university studies.
- Our research identified some expectations and experiences you may want to consider to promote student success and sustainable engagement with their university studies.

**BACKGROUND**

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT STUDENTS**

Remember that university requires an enormous adjustment for first-year students.

- The shift from expectations to experience reflects that students make enormous changes in their expectations, on factors such as accessibility to lecturers, learning to work more independently, adjusting to a larger workload, and developing a study/life balance in their first year.
- Almost 30% of students said that talking to university staff helped them to decide to stay on at university, and not leave.
- It is important that first-year teachers, lecturers and tutors are mindful that the First Year at University for new students represents not just a substantial academic adjustment, but also a huge personal, emotional, geographical, and financial transition. Providing support where possible for students who are struggling is a critical part of your role.
Students identified three key things important to their university experience.

- **Feedback:** Students need to adapt to the fact that the levels and types of feedback at university are different from school (95% of lecturers believe they give sufficient feedback. 98% commencing students expect feedback will be critical: Yet only 55% of continuing students are happy with the amount of feedback they received). Early on students expect feedback such as written comments on an assignment or follow up advice; later on their feedback needs change and they seek more direct one-on-one interaction with teaching staff.

- **Friends:** Students report that a social support network is a key part of their university life (80% of new students agree it is important to have a close group of friends for support at university).

- **Finding the balance:** While 85% of lecturers and incoming students think it is important to have outside interests, only 50% of continuing students actually had structured interests outside study. So, while students think balance between university and commitments outside the university context is important, most struggle to achieve this.

  "Making new friends that had similar interests to mine that I could study with and get help if I needed it. This was important as I could discuss assignments and tests (with) people who were in a similar situation to myself. My peers maintained my motivation over the semester and contributed different aspects to my learning."

**TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY**

- **Don’t assume students come prepared:** Just because students complete Year 12 does not mean they are fully prepared for university. Over 50% of students and staff agree that school does not adequately prepare students for university.

  "High school could have helped me prepare for university better! In high school I had a lot of feedback from teachers and numerous drafts at university. I rarely get enough feedback and no drafts at all."

- **Independent learning style:** Most lecturers do not provide all necessary materials for learning. 95% of lecturers and 65% of commencing students say there is a difference or extreme difference between learning styles at school and university.

  "I had no idea what to expect and it was very different to high school. I had to get used to the more independent learning that we had and I had to research the topics in depth in my own time."

- **Assistance provided:** 80% of school teachers, 65% of lecturers and 55% of continuing students believe the level of assistance provided to struggling students is different at university compared to school.

- **Unrealistic expectations:** 75% of new university students have unrealistic expectations about the amount of study they are expected to do at university. 70 – 80% of students, school and university staff report a difference or extreme difference in both the amount and difficulty of work at university compared to school.

**HOW YOU CAN PROMOTE A SMOOTH TRANSITION**

- **Communicate:** Talk to students up front and early on about the differences between school and university in terms of workload and expectations. Emphasise that university is more like a full-time job and students need to commit 40+ hours a week to full time study.

  "I think the main thing early on (that made my uni experience successful) was the face-to-face support, such as tutors and people in the learning and teaching unit sitting down with you and explaining things so I could fully understand things. That was the most important thing..."

- **Make yourself accessible:** Students highly value access to first-year teaching staff. The accessibility of teaching staff and the ability to obtain individual assistance from the teaching staff was a pre-conceived expectation, with over 85% of commencing students relying on easy and convenient access to teaching staff.

- **Be friendly and enthusiastic:** Students highly value teachers that are friendly, enthusiastic and passionate about what they are teaching. Almost 95% of students reporting they learned more from such staff.

- **Provide resources and material to promote learning:** Students value support provided to aid their learning. particularly materials provided to them by their teachers.

- **Lectures are critical to learning:** Students come to university expecting that group-based learning (attending lectures and participating in in-class discussions) is important but continuing students also rate courses led by enthusiastic lecturers and the fact that they have access to dedicated study spaces as the key aspects of their formal learning environment.

- **Encourage students to seek help:** Promote the services available to students such as information sessions or training on independent learning, research and referencing skills, how to write an academic paper and other study skills critical to success.

**REMEMBER:**

**YOU** can help new students survive, come alive, and thrive!