



Department of Education,  
Training & Youth Affairs

# **Trends in the First Year Experience**

## **In Australian universities**

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## Executive summary

This report provides an analysis of trends in the perceptions and behaviours of first year undergraduate students in seven Australian universities. Drawing on a 1994 study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Melbourne, 2,609 first year students in the same universities were surveyed in the second semester of 1999. While the two survey questionnaires were identical in most respects, a series of additional items related to student expectations and use of learning technologies provides some new benchmarks for future monitoring. In the five years since the 1994 survey the pace of change in higher education has been dramatic on all fronts. The conjunction of the pressures arising from the expansion in student numbers, innovations in teaching and learning, and intense market competition between universities, have changed the landscape of higher education. In particular, the context for undergraduate students commencing university has been changed with increased choice and flexibility in course design and modes of delivery, and the introduction of a range of institutional strategies to improve transition from school to university.

The following summarises the major patterns of stability and change from 1994 to 1999:

- Students' reasons for coming to university remain quite stable. Intrinsic interest in a field of study combined with the desire to improve their job prospects are high on the agenda of most first year students; around three-quarters are clear about the reasons they come to university.
- There has been little change in the considerable number of students who have a very uncertain start at university. This is generally through a combination of factors, which can include lack of accurate initial information, poor course choices, failure to get their first choice, or unrealistic expectations of the amount of work and time involved in university study. One in five of the 1999 first year students hoped to change to a different course after their first year, and, as in 1994, about one-third seriously consider deferring during their first semester.
- Despite widespread and concerted efforts to improve the links between school and university, it is still the case that about one-third of the students who go direct from school to university do not feel they were ready to choose a course, and two thirds are of the view that they were not well-prepared for university study.
- However, there are some indications that the gap between school and university noted in the 1994 survey may not now be so wide. More students in 1999 found university study more fulfilling than school (61 per cent) and fewer felt it was more demanding than school (57 per cent). Students have relatively realistic expectations about the amount of new material they will experience at university; they both expect and find a significant amount of such material.

- On the whole, there has been little change in the level of students' academic orientation or their academic application between 1994 and 1999. Around 60 per cent continue to enjoy the intellectual challenge of their subjects and some 40 per cent enjoy the theoretical content of their subjects. However, the proportion of students who say that they get a lot of satisfaction from study has decreased from 43 per cent to 40 per cent; and the proportion who find it difficult to motivate themselves to study has increased significantly, from 42 per cent to 48 per cent.
- The 1999 survey included a new set of questions regarding the use of teaching and learning technologies. Overall, web-based resources and information designed specifically for courses, and interactive multi-media software designed specifically for courses are relatively widespread (although between 25 and over 40 per cent of students say they have not as yet used these learning tools). On-line discussion groups and virtual tutoring are much less well developed and used by a relatively small minority of students. There are fairly clear indications of different patterns of use by students across fields of study.
- Perhaps the most striking difference between the 1994 and 1999 responses is an increased proportion of students who are enrolled full-time and engaged in part-time work, and an increase in the average number of hours students are employed. There has been a 9 per cent increase in the proportion of full-time students who work part-time, and a 14 per cent increase in the mean number of hours they work. While the average hours worked is 12.5 hour per week, the proportion who say they work between 11 and 20 hours has increased from 32 per cent to 42 per cent since 1994. Fewer students are spending five days per week at university and average course contact hours have dropped slightly since 1994.
- Despite some of the negative perceptions of specific aspects of the first year experience reported in the study, there are some positive trends with respect to the overall perceptions. The proportion of students who say they find their course intellectually stimulating—around two-thirds—is unchanged from 1994, and there have been small but significant increases in the proportions of students who are enjoying their course overall (from 61 to 64 per cent) and in those who are very satisfied with their initial university experience (from 61 to 63 per cent).

The data in the report provide an exceptionally strong basis for reflecting on the effectiveness of initiatives over the last five years aimed at improving the first year experience. It is now possible to monitor the ongoing and rapid changes in the student experience. The findings suggest a trend of less attachment and commitment to a range of aspects of university life and academic work on the part of those who work longer hours in paid employment. This requires closer investigation. It appears that university study occupies a smaller proportion of a growing number of students' lives. The slight but noteworthy decline in motivation to study, the increase in the hours of paid work, and the trend towards less engagement with the university have implications for policy and practice concerning the first year experience at both system and institutional levels.

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Overview

In 1994, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Melbourne, was commissioned by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) to examine the experience of on-campus undergraduates in their first year of study, with particular reference to the role and significance of the social context for learning. The study was commissioned in response to increasing international recognition that students' initial experiences were pivotal in establishing attitudes, outlooks and approaches to learning.

An important element in the context for the study was the growing diversity of the student population as the number of university students increased. Participation in higher education had broadened and Australia entered a period of mass higher education in the first half of the 1990s. At the time, we commented that the notion of diversity was complex and extended beyond the usual differences in age, gender, place of living, ethnicity and socio-economic background, to include diversity in values, attitudes and expectations.

The 1994 study included a survey of 4,028 students in seven universities selected to represent the diversity of institutions in Australia, a series of case study interviews with staff and students, and a survey of all Australian universities that explored the nature and range of activities directed towards meeting the needs of first year students.

In 1999 we had an opportunity to repeat this study through the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) Evaluations and Investigations Programme, this time through a survey of 2,609 students in the same universities. This dataset five years on provides an excellent opportunity for comparison with the earlier findings. It also establishes new benchmarks to monitor major changes in modes of teaching and course delivery, as well as in student study habits and daily lives.

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## 1.2 Summary of 'first year on campus'

'First Year on Campus' (McInnis and James 1995), the report of the 1994 study, was the first national study in Australia to examine the first year experience in detail. Overall, it found that the transition to university represented 'a challenging hurdle' for some students and 'an intimidating gulf' for others. The report concluded that the challenge for universities was how to 'induct large numbers of students into the world of higher learning while meeting a range of student needs' (p.x).

Overall, more students than in the past appeared to need support in their adjustment to academic work and life, and the report noted there was a clear need

for universities to pay greater attention to the fundamentals of good teaching, and to assist students in their adjustment to university study and life. However, the point was also made that improvements in the teaching and learning environment should continue to be aimed at producing independent learners and providing the essential challenges of learning in higher education.

The 1994 study found that most first year on-campus students enjoyed the opportunity for intellectual challenge and were essentially positive in their outlook. They had a clear sense of purpose in attending university and clear aims, which for the great majority were not as narrowly vocational as was widely assumed. The courses they had chosen held some intrinsic interest for them.

However, many students had negative views of specific aspects of teaching, courses and universities, as evident in the following findings:

- Barely half the students surveyed found their subjects interesting.
- Only 53 per cent thought academic staff were enthusiastic about the subjects they were teaching.
- Less than half thought that teaching staff were good at explaining things.
- Only 41 per cent thought there were positive attitudes towards learning among their fellow students.
- Over a quarter of students worked in isolation from their peers and were not interested in extra curricular activities.
- Around 30 per cent of the students had for various reasons seriously considered deferring sometime during the first semester.

At the time, we commented on the apparent mismatch between the views of students revealed in our study and the views of academics reflected in various studies, which showed an increasing number of teaching staff were dissatisfied with the academic quality of students. Whereas our findings showed that most students felt they had a clear sense of purpose, other research indicated that most academics believed students were lacking in purpose and application (McInnis 1996).

A range of background and contextual factors were associated with first year students' attitudes towards university in 1994:

- Females tended to have stronger academic orientation and application towards their studies, a stronger sense of purpose, and were more likely to be satisfied with their courses, than were males.
- The type of secondary school that students attended was associated with differences in their attitudes and their perceptions of university teaching and courses. Students from independent private schools were less likely to say they had difficulties adjusting to the style of teaching at university compared with government or Catholic school students.
- Students from homes where neither parent had been to university showed a stronger sense of purpose and application.
- Students living in residential colleges were more positive about their university experiences.

In the 1994 study and in the present one, we were especially interested in the attitudes and experiences of students who had left secondary school at the end of the previous year and come straight to university, those students we describe as school leavers. In 1994, we found that school leavers in general found the adjustment to a new environment and new roles somewhat more difficult than did older students. They were relatively less certain of their roles, less diligent in their study habits and less academically oriented.

Further analysis of the school-leaver cohort by McInnis and James (DETYA 1999) showed that the most dissatisfied school leavers were more likely to be unclear about their motives for being at university, and few believed that school had been a good preparation for university. These students were also more likely to have experienced difficulties in adjusting to what can be broadly characterised as a 'university teaching style' which, in contrast to the school experience, is more likely to involve large group teaching and more independent learning (p.2). From our analysis of the 1994 survey, we developed the concept of the 'uncertain school leaver', ie. students who disliked studying, disliked the course they were doing or wanted to change course. (However, it should be noted that our study did not include students who had actually withdrawn; at the beginning of the second semester when the survey was conducted they could be called 'dissatisfied persisters').

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### 1.3 The 1999 project: aims and design

The 1994 study provides a unique data base from which to examine trends in the first year university experience. The aim of the 1999 study was to replicate the student survey of the original study in the same seven institutions that participated previously, in order to examine trends over a five-year period in:

- the attitudes and behaviour of students in their first year;
- their patterns of adjustments to university study; and
- the quality of the experience provided by universities.

A brief survey of shifts in institutional policies and practices in relation to the first year experience in the participating universities was also included.

Major questions guiding the study were:

- Have the problems of transition and adjustment experienced by students changed over the past five years?
- Are the goals, study habits and levels of commitment of students changing?
- Are changes in the social and economic contexts of students (eg. source of income, part-time work) related to changes in the quality of their undergraduate experience?
- Have there been any notable changes with respect to the quality of experience for the diverse groups (ie. age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, school background) identified in the 1994 study?

- Have there been changes in institutional policies and practices in relation to the first year experience over the last five years?

The theoretical framework which underlies the present survey is that which guided the original study. First year at university is conceptualised as a process of two-way socialisation whereby the student shapes, and is shaped by, the university experience. It views the student as an active participant in the process of socialisation, with responsibility for making choices and commitments. Universities, by themselves, do not ‘make’ the student experience; this requires an active contribution from students.

Many factors contribute to the quality of a student’s first year experience. They include:

- background characteristics and experiences that students bring with them to university that are likely to influence their behaviour, outlook and expectations of the course and university they have chosen;
- contextual factors such as accommodation and financial arrangements that are likely to have an impact on matters such as study habits; and
- university factors such as the quality of teaching and course organisation that are likely to influence students’ learning experiences and their levels of satisfaction.

At the time of the 1994 study, there were 37 universities in the Australian Unified National System. Seven were selected as representative of the system as a whole and invited to participate in the project. The same seven institutions were approached to participate in 1999; all accepted. There have been changes in each of these institutions in the past five years, some of which we describe below. As in the 1995 report it is not our purpose to report institutional differences or to provide comparisons of performance. We aim to maintain the focus on system-wide issues concerning the first year experience and on some matters we have made every effort to avoid identifying institutions. We have provided each institution with the aggregate data from their student responses along with the data for all other (unidentified) universities.

*Established University* is a large and old university offering a wide range of professional programmes. Most programmes have high entry scores for admission. International fee-paying students now form a significant and growing proportion of the student body. The student population is younger than other institutions in the study because of the high intake of school leavers.

In contrast, *New University* was created to service a large industrial suburban region of a capital city. It has a number of campuses in the area, and a significant city campus. New University has made a point of developing courses to serve the local area and has in the past five years established a policy of open access and associated learning support and curriculum development. Since the 1994 survey it has amalgamated with the local TAFE college and is committed to developing mixed sector programmes for students.

*Suburban University* had its origins in the expansion of higher education in the 1960s. It is a mid-sized university offering a wide range of courses. It includes a main campus some 30–40 minutes travel from the city and a number of smaller campuses, including several in rural areas.

*International University* is a well-established large university which continues to attract a high proportion of international students and is particularly well-known for its large numbers of students from Asia.

*Regional University* is a medium sized university in a rural location. A distinctive feature of this university is the high proportion of first year students who live in residential colleges in or near the campus. It also has a high proportion of distance education students who were not included in this study.

The *University of Applied Studies* has a reputation for practical courses and applied courses, with its origins as an institute of technology. It is medium to large in size, has strong industry-education links and offers courses in many professional areas. The student population profile tends to be fairly close to the national profile for first year students.

*Consolidated University* was established in the early 1990s, however, its combined campuses have a much longer history. It is a large university, well known for its vocationally oriented programmes. It offers a wide range of courses. Consolidated University has a larger than average proportion of mature aged students in first year courses and has adopted policies promoting access and equity and alternative forms of entry.

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## 1.4 The 1999 first year student population

The total number of commencing undergraduate students in Australian universities in 1999 was 195,135. This is an increase of approximately 23 per cent since 1994, although the rate of increase has been somewhat uneven from year to year. The number of fee-paying overseas students continues to rise, with a lower proportion of non-overseas students in 1999 compared with five years ago (86 per cent compared with 92 per cent). The majority of undergraduate commencers are women. Younger students represent a little over half of undergraduate commencers. In 1999, 51 per cent of all undergraduate commencers, and 55.4 per cent of non-overseas undergraduate commencers were aged 19 and under (DETYA 2000).

It is noteworthy that across the student population as a whole, external enrolments and on-campus full-time enrolments grew more than did part-time on-campus enrolments in 1999, compared with the previous year. This is especially pertinent to our findings on the changes in the number of hours full-time students are spending in part-time work.

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## 1.5 Survey method

The core of the 1999 project was a survey sent to a random sample of 25 per cent of first year students, stratified by field of study, from each of seven universities. As in 1994, each institution carried out its own selection of students. In contrast to the previous study where questionnaires were posted out by the institutions, in 1999, questionnaires to students from all but one of the universities were posted out centrally by the project team.

Both the 1994 and the 1999 surveys were aimed at first time first year students, so that we could explore students' genuinely 'new' experiences in coming to university. Despite changes to the DETYA definition of commencing students, our samples did include a small proportion of students who had had previous experience of higher education study. The DETYA definition of a commencing student, for the purposes of their main data collections is 'a person who enrolled for the first time in a particular higher education course at a particular higher education institution after 31 March (in one year) and before 1 April (in the following year)' (DETYA 2000, p. 205). Hence it is possible for a commencing student to have previously commenced at another institution or in another course.

In the 1994 survey, we included survey questions about whether students were first timers. In 1999, we made every effort to ensure that the sample was comprised predominantly of first time first years and institutions were largely able to select samples that came within these parameters. Even so, responses to several questions included in the survey revealed that some respondents had commenced courses at the same or other institutions. However, the final section of the questionnaire clearly targets students who were at school in 1998, and these items provide some of the key data on differences between school and university.

The first mailout of questionnaires was completed in the first week of August, 1999. A second mailout to those students who had not to date responded took place in the last week of August and the first week of September. An overall response rate of 37 per cent, representing 2,609 students, was recorded. The institutional response rate varied considerably, from 23 per cent in one institution to the mid 40s in several others. In 1994, the response rate was considerably higher, with an overall rate of 56.6 per cent and rates of over 60 per cent in several institutions. The lower rate in 1999 is consistent with similar mailed surveys conducted by the CSHE and other research organisations and indeed is somewhat higher than the 25 per cent more typically being obtained in recent surveys. The major factor contributing to this decline in the past five years has been the burgeoning of various types of student monitoring and surveying in and by universities, and there is every likelihood that students are reacting against this. It is interesting to note the proliferation of surveys of first year students in institutions since the publication of the 1995 report, including in two of the seven institutions in our sample.

Full details of the design of the study, the selection of samples from the seven institutions and the characteristics of the present sample of first year students are contained in the Appendix.

The 1994 questionnaire was largely retained, with some important changes. A very small number of questions was discarded as they had failed to provide useful information in the previous survey; several questions were slightly re-worded for greater clarity. The most significant changes were:

- the inclusion of a set of questions regarding expectations and realities about various aspects of university work and study, in order to explore in more detail the 'gap' between students' expectations and their actual experiences, which had emerged as an important finding in 1994; and
- the addition of questions about students' expectations and experiences of the new technologies in teaching and learning, and how valuable they found them,

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in order to monitor a significant development in higher education delivery over the past five years.

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## 1.6 The 1994 and 1999 samples compared

As in 1994, the majority of our 1999 sample were young students coming straight from secondary school. However, the 1999 sample included a higher proportion of students (74 per cent compared with 66 per cent) who were school leavers, ie. they had completed some form of secondary school certificate in the year previous to the survey. This is likely to result from our greater efforts in 1999 to obtain a sample of 'first timers'. It is also shown in the slightly higher percentage of students in the 1999 sample aged 19 and under (74 per cent compared with 71 per cent) and the slightly lower percentages of 20–24 year olds (13 per cent compared with 17 per cent) and over 25 year olds (10 per cent compared with 12 per cent).

The two samples were essentially the same as far as gender breakdown was concerned, with approximately two-thirds females and one-third males.

The proportion of Australian-born students was substantially the same in both samples, just over three-quarters in both cases. So too were the proportions with mothers and fathers born outside Australia (around 40 per cent of mothers and 45 per cent of fathers). On two other measures of ethnicity, a language other than English was usually spoken in the homes of 23 per cent of students in the 1999 sample (compared with 28 per cent in 1994) and 24 per cent of the 1999 sample had migrated to Australia in the previous ten years.

Whereas Vietnam-born students were the largest single ethnic group in 1994 (3 per cent), in 1999, their numbers had fallen proportionately to two per cent, with larger numbers of students born in Hong Kong (3 per cent), Malaysia (2 per cent) and other Asian countries (2 per cent).

The two samples differed in respect of the numbers of students whose parents did not have a degree. In 1994, neither parent of 64 per cent of students in the sample had completed a university degree; in 1999 this had fallen to 57 per cent. In 1994, 15 per cent of students had both parents with a degree; in 1999, this figure was 17 per cent. The differences suggest that we are looking at a group with somewhat more 'educational capital' than in 1994, a reflection of a somewhat younger sample who are more likely to have had parents who themselves are younger and more likely to have had the opportunity to study at university. The proportion having attended a government school remains the same (54 per cent); the percentage from Catholic schools increased from 20 per cent to 22 per cent and the percentage from independent private schools decreased from 24 per cent to 21 per cent.

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## 1.7 The changing context

In the five years since the first national survey the pace of change has been dramatic on all fronts. The conjunction of the pressures arising from the expansion in student numbers, innovations in teaching—including the rapid expansion in the use of new technologies—and market competition, have changed the landscape of higher education. In particular, the context for undergraduate students commencing

university has been changed by the increased choice and flexibility in course design and modes of delivery, and the introduction of a range of institutional strategies to improve transition from school to university. Perhaps the most relevant change in the higher education context in the last five years has been the pressure on universities to improve the quality of teaching and the implementation of more comprehensive accountability processes. This has had a direct impact on the work roles of academics who carry the primary responsibility for improving the quality of the first year experience.

On the basis of a 1993 CSHE survey of academics (McInnis 1996), we noted that many academics were unhappy with the calibre of undergraduate students and that their perceptions of the motives and interests of students did not reflect what the students themselves were saying. A similar national study of academics conducted in 1999 (McInnis in press) found evidence of growing tensions for academics over the last five years as they attempt to improve the quality of teaching. The average working week for academics has increased to almost 50 hours and more than a third report that this is the result of a substantial increase in class contact hours. More importantly, a larger proportion (4 per cent) report an increase in their teaching-related activities, such as preparing teaching materials and marking papers. A large proportion of academics (69 per cent) believe that providing academic support is one of the most significant factors in the increase in their workload.

Finally, almost a third of the academics surveyed believe that the calibre of the students has declined over the last five years—only 11 per cent think the current cohort is academically more capable. There are two other notable changes in academic outlooks over the period 1993–1999 that are directly relevant to the first year experience. The proportion citing ‘too many students’ as a hindrance to teaching has increased from 36 per cent to 46 per cent, and likewise there has been a major increase—from 37 to 50 per cent—in the proportion who say that dealing with ‘too wide a range of abilities’ is a problem. Given the nature of first year classes, those teaching at the first year are most likely to experience these obstacles at this level.

The casualisation of the academic workforce is also a noteworthy change that impinges on the quality of the first year experience. The proportion of all full-time staff in Australia declined from 83.6 per cent in 1988 to 76.3 per cent in 1998. According to DETYA analysis of trends ‘the increase in casual employment of academic staff was overwhelmingly for staff undertaking teaching only’ (DETYA 1999). While casual teaching staff have a strong commitment to teaching, the reality is that they are generally not paid to provide academic or pastoral support to students in addition to their actual teaching hours. Student perceptions of staff availability and feedback on progress reported in Chapter 5 should be considered against this background of changes in academic profiles, realities and outlooks.

## 2. Sense of purpose and adjustment to university life

### 2.1 Reasons for enrolling

The 1994 survey showed that first year students had four main reasons for enrolling at university: studying in a field of interest; improving job prospects; developing talents and creative abilities; and training for a specific job. At the time, we noted that the patterns had changed little from earlier surveys despite the prediction that significant levels of youth unemployment in the early 1990s would lead to higher levels of vocationalism in that cohort of students. As the data in Table 2.1 show, the order of reasons for enrolling and the proportions of students on each item have barely changed since 1994. The only shift is the apparent slight increase in the still very small percentage of students who say that being with friends is a factor influencing their decision to enrol.

**Table 2.1** Reasons for enrolling (%)

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

Reason		Not important	Important	
Studying in a field that really interests me	1994	0	5	94
	1999	1	3	96
To improve my job prospects	1994	5	11	84
	1999	4	10	86
Developing talents and creative abilities	1994	7	20	74
	1999	6	21	73
To get training for a specific job	1994	10	18	73
	1999	9	17	74
The expectations of my parents and family	1994	52	23	25
	1999	51	26	23
Few other opportunities because of the poor job market	1994	56	26	18
	1999	52	30	18
Being with my friends	1994	71	18	10*
	1999	67	20	14

\* difference significant at 0.01

## 2.2 Sense of purpose

A sense of purpose and clear objectives are linked to confidence in approaching university study and greater persistence (Williams 1982). In the 1994 survey, we found they were also linked to self-rated academic performance, with students who reported average marks of above 70 per cent rating higher on clarity of purpose. At that time, a clear majority of students indicated a strong sense of purpose in coming to university, with almost three-quarters agreeing with the statement that they were clear about the reasons they came. As a group they also rejected the notion that they were treating university as a place to mark time while they decided their future.

In 1999 the data in Table 2.2 again show a remarkably consistent pattern of stability over the five years between surveys. The small decline in the percentage (down to 59 per cent) who say they know the type of occupation they want will be interesting to monitor in the future.

**Table 2.2** Sense of purpose (%)

1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Disagree		Agree
I am clear about the reasons I came to university	1994	10	16	74
	1999	12	17	72*
I know the type of occupation I want	1994	21	18	62
	1999	24	17	59*
University is just marking time while I decide my future	1994	72	17	11
	1999	69	18	13**
University will really help me get what I want in life	1994	12	26	62
	1999	11	26	63

\* differences significant at 0.05 level \*\* difference significant at 0.01 level

## 2.3 Changes in the gap between school and university: ready or not?

Our findings from the 1994 sample indicated that there was a gap, in some cases better described as a gulf, between students' experience of school and their experience of university. At the time, we reported that there were mixed messages from students in relation to the differences between school and university and a fairly high degree of uncertainty about some issues, evident in the high proportion of neutral responses to questionnaire items. However, it was clear that a number of factors contributed to the disparity experienced between school and university.

In both 1994 and 1999, school leavers (ie. those students who had completed secondary school in the year previous to the survey) were asked a series of questions comparing school and university. In 1994 just under half (45 per cent) of the school leavers believed that the standard of work required at university was much higher than they expected. Nearly two thirds of school leavers (64 per cent)

believed that studying at university was more demanding than it was at school. In general, students perceived that the links between school and university were not very clear. The majority of students did not agree that their final school year was a very good preparation for their first year study at university; or that their subjects at university clearly built on their study at school. Some found the shift to personal responsibility for their learning very difficult. In the 1994 study, academics summarised the main problems of student academic adjustment as relating to the standards required, the style of teaching and learning and the level of difficulty of university work.

Does the gap between school and university experience exist to the extent that it did five years ago? In short, the answer is yes. Student beliefs about the relatively unclear links between school and university work have not shifted noticeably over the past five years (Table 2.3). There remain around two thirds of school leavers who do not agree that their final school year was a very good preparation for the study they are now doing and who do not believe their subjects at university clearly build on their study at school.

Although not statistically significant, a close to 5 per cent decline in the percentage of those who would have preferred a general first year before embarking on a specific course of study is noteworthy. Indeed, less than a quarter agree and just over ten per cent strongly agreed. It also remains the case that around one-third of school leavers believe that they were not really ready to choose a university course on leaving secondary school.

However, the data in Table 2.3 also indicate two areas where student beliefs do appear to have shifted. They provide us with somewhat contradictory findings. There has been a small but statistically significant increase (from 57 per cent to 61 per cent), in the percentage of students finding that the study they are doing at university is more fulfilling than study at school; and a decrease (from 64 per cent to 57 per cent) in the percentage finding that studying at university is more demanding than it was at school. In summary, more students are finding university study more fulfilling than school, and fewer are finding it more demanding than school.

There are a number of possible explanations for these findings. Before exploring them, we note that 'more demanding' can mean different things to different people and it is likely that students interpreted the phrase in various ways. For some, it may refer to the standard of work; for others, the greater amount of independent learning required at university, the sheer volume of work required; or the amount of difficult material they encounter.

**Table 2.3 School and university compared, 1994–1999**

(% of students agreeing that a statement is important)

Item	1994 (N=4 028)	1999 (N=2 609)
The study I am doing at university is more fulfilling than study at school	57.2	61.2*
I feel pressured by the financial commitment made by my parents to send me to university	24.5	25.2
I would have preferred starting with a general first year at university before choosing a specific course	27.7	22.9
The standard of work expected at university is much higher than I expected	44.7	43.1
During Year 12, my parents were very supportive of my study	75.7	74.2
I often discuss my university work with members of my family	49.1	51.7
Studying at university is more demanding than it was at school	63.9	57.2*
I was not really ready to choose a university course on leaving secondary school	34.3	33.7
My final school year was a very good preparation for the study I am now doing	35.6	34.2
My parents have little understanding of what I am doing at university	30.7	31.3
The subjects at university clearly build on my study at school	34.4	32.9
Family support is less important to me now than when I was at school	25.0	25.7

\* differences significant at 0.01

A closer look at whether this finding is sustained across sub-groups, different institutions and different fields of study helps in speculations about the reasons that may lie behind it. The statistically significant decrease in the percentage of students finding university more demanding than school is sustained for males and for females. In both 1994 and 1999, more males than females agreed that university study was more demanding than school. However, there has been a greater decrease over the five-year period in the percentage of males who agree, ie. more males than females still agree that university study is more demanding (58.1 per cent compared with 56.8 per cent), but this represents an 8.4 per cent drop for males and only a 5.6 per cent drop for females since 1994.

In 1999 compared with 1994, there are more males and more females finding university study more fulfilling than school study; however, the differences do not reach statistical significance.

The two shifts are principally related to younger (19 years and under) school leavers rather than to older school leavers, ie. the small proportion of mature age students who completed their secondary schooling in the year prior to the survey. However, from 1994 to 1999 there has been a very large jump in the percentage of 20-year-olds who find university studies more fulfilling than school study (66 per cent to 83 per cent).

For three of the seven universities (*New, Regional, and Consolidated*) the decrease in the number of students finding university more demanding than school has been significant, in each case by more than 10 per cent. At *Established* and *Suburban* there has been a small decrease of just over two per cent, while at *Applied* the proportion has not changed at all, and at *International* there has been an increase of more than five per cent who find university more demanding than school.

The decrease has also occurred across nine fields of study, (numbers of students in Veterinary Science were too small to be included in this analysis). Only in Business/Administration, Science and Engineering is the difference statistically significant. For those doing Combined Degrees, there was a small increase in the percentage agreeing that university study was more demanding than school.

With respect to students finding university study more fulfilling than school, in seven fields of study (all except Business/Administration, Education, and Veterinary Science which is not included because of small numbers), more students are saying they are finding university study more fulfilling than school study, although only in Health is this increase statistically significant.

There are also some strong and positive shifts in the proportions of students at *Established, New, International, and Regional* who agree that university study is more fulfilling than school study. The increases in these proportions since the 1994 survey range from 8.2 to 14.5 per cent. There was a mere 2 per cent increase at *Suburban* and slight but not significant decreases at *Applied* and *Consolidated*.

A number of explanations for the above set of findings, which seem to be reflected to some degree across most institutions and fields of study, are possible: university standards and expectations may be dropping; students are being better prepared for the demands of university by schools; universities are better at supporting and assisting the adjustment of students in ways that ease the transition from school to university; schools and universities are working better together, thereby making the transition less demanding and more fulfilling for more students.

There is no evidence from the present study that university standards relative to expectations have dropped in the eyes of students. School leavers in the 1999 survey are about as likely as those in the 1994 survey (44.7 per cent compared with 43.1 per cent) to agree that 'the standard of work expected at university is much higher than I expected'. On the other hand, findings in the following chapter suggest that students are somewhat more realistic about what is required of them and in some ways better prepared. Any assessment of the degree to which university is more or less demanding than school is likely to be related to what students expect. In the following section, we also outline how students expect quite a high level of new material in their courses and how, in reality, they find less than they expected. Differences such as this, between what is expected and what students find when they come to university, are likely to influence their judgement of how much more 'demanding' university work is compared to school work.

The reasons for the increases in the proportions who find their study more fulfilling in some institutions can also be interpreted in a number of ways. This may reflect negatively on changes in the final year school curriculum in some states since the 1994 survey. On the other hand, the efforts of some universities to improve their curriculum design and delivery may be providing students with a more fulfilling experience in contrast to their school study.

### **2.3.1 Adjusting to a different curriculum**

We asked students to compare their expectations and actual experience of university on two items concerning curriculum and support for their study. Almost three-quarters of first year students (73.8 per cent) are expecting a significant amount of new curriculum material and 70 per cent find that this is the case. Only a minority of students (39 per cent) expect that there will be a lot of special assistance available to them in areas that are new to them and, after one semester, even fewer (32.5 per cent) find this to be the reality.

As far as expectations about the amount of new material are concerned, the overall mean rating for this item was just over 4 on a 5-point scale, a high rating compared to other items. In reality, slightly fewer students find new material than anticipated (a mean rating of 3.9 on a 5-point scale). This quite small difference between expectations and reality is statistically significant, indicating a narrow spread of ratings and a high degree of consensus amongst students on this matter. The general finding was consistent across all seven institutions.

Students' expectations about special assistance available in areas new to them fall around the middle of a 5-point scale and are certainly not high. In reality, fewer find less assistance than anticipated. Again, this finding is consistent across the seven institutions.

In summary:

- Almost three-quarters of first year students are expecting a lot of material that is new to them and a few find that there is not as much new material as they expected; and
- The majority of students have low expectations about the availability of special assistance in areas that are new to them and an even larger majority find that such assistance is in fact not available.

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## **2.4 An uncertain start**

While some students settle into the work and life of university fairly readily, others have a much more uncertain start. A growing body of literature has developed around the importance of students' early subject and course choices, and the reality that initial choices are not always the 'right' ones for various reasons. Some students lack enough information or accurate information on which to make informed choices (James, Baldwin and McInnis 1999); some are uncertain about what they want to do when they leave school. In the 1999 survey, 23 per cent of school leavers agreed that they would have preferred a general first year at university before choosing a specific course and 34 per cent agreed they were not ready to

choose a university course when they left secondary school. In addition, the reality of the university entry system is that students do not always get their first choice of course and may find themselves studying in an area to which they are not fully committed.

Uncertain starts also occur when students begin a course and subsequently switch to another course in the same institution or one at a different institution. This is likely when students fail to get their first choice and settle for something else as a grounding for what they really want, or while they wait for an opening for the course of their choice to become available.

### 2.4.1 Choices and changes

- Almost one-third (32 per cent) of the 1999 sample did not get their course of first preference;
- Of this third, 48 per cent received their second choice; 28 per cent their third choice; 12 per cent their fourth and 12 per cent their fifth or lower choice;
- 7 per cent had changed their course and 4 per cent had changed their institution after their first enrolment in 1999;
- One in five students (20 per cent) hoped to change to a different course after completion of first year; and
- 18 per cent had withdrawn from a subject or unit, the majority (61 per cent) from one subject or unit. A quarter had withdrawn from two units.

These findings combine to show a picture of a proportion of first year students beginning their university study in a somewhat conditional and uncertain way. That one in five hoped to change to a different course in their second year and almost one in five had withdrawn from one or more subjects or units is especially noteworthy. Some comparisons with 1994 are relevant here. While the proportion who did not get their first preference in 1994, or hoped to change course, was almost the same (33 per cent and 18.5 per cent respectively), the proportion of students who had withdrawn from a subject was much lower in 1994 (8.8 per cent). The increase in the number of students who are withdrawing from subjects in 1999 possibly indicates more choice and flexibility in course structures. It may also be the outcome of poor course and subject choice, a major factor in drop-out decisions (Yorke 1999). Either way, this apparent trend bears closer monitoring.

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## 2.5 Deferring

All of the students in our survey were currently enrolled; however, a third were sufficiently dissatisfied, uncertain, unhappy or concerned to have seriously considered deferring at some stage during the semester. This figure has not changed since 1994. The consistency with which various research studies identify about one-third of students as likely to withdraw has been noted in a review of the literature by McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Tease (in press).

In 'First Year on Campus', we noted that the level of disquiet and uncertainty was perhaps not surprising. As well as the difficulties of adjusting to a new learning and

working environment, 34 per cent of school leavers in the 1994 survey believed that they were not ready to choose a university course on leaving secondary school and almost a third were not enrolled in the course of their first preference.

In 1994, we provided an opportunity for students to indicate two from a small list of possible reasons they might have considered for deferring, and we invited further open-ended comment. This provided us with some indications of the main types of reasons behind this consideration. No single reason predominated, although there was a tendency for 'university-related' reasons to be mentioned more frequently than were 'non-university-related' reasons (McInnis and James 1995, p.50).

In the 1999 survey, we refined this question somewhat in order to explore students' deferral thinking in more detail. In the past five years, there has been considerable attention paid to the reasons for student deferment and withdrawal both in Australia and overseas. A recent literature review (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Tease in press) which focused predominantly on the Australian research, noted that:

*Student withdrawal is a complex and often very individualised process involving the interplay of institutional, social and personal factors. Identifying single factors influencing withdrawal is risky because the research consistently demonstrates that it is rarely the case that any one factor is the cause for a given student deciding to leave (p.3).*

Table 2.4 shows the percentage of students rating the importance of various reasons for considering deferring. The findings are consistent with the literature in that no single reason stands out as the most important. Emotional health and wanting to change courses are rated as important by more than 40 per cent of students who consider deferring. Next in importance are disliking study (37 per cent), not finding University as they expected (36 per cent) and thinking that they would fail (37 per cent).

In 1994 and again in 1999, we found that students who had considered deferring differed from those who had not in the following ways:

- they were more likely to say they did not get satisfaction from studying; and
- they were more likely to say they did not enjoy the intellectual challenge of their subjects.

**Table 2.4** Reasons for considering deferring, 1999 (% of students)

N=840

	Important/ Very important	Neutral	Not relevant
Emotional health	46	12	42
I wanted to change courses	42	11	47
I disliked studying	37	19	43
I thought I might fail	37	15	48
University wasn't what I expected	36	19	45
Financial reasons	34	11	55
Physical health	26	10	64
Paid work commitments	21	8	71
Problems with daily travel	19	10	71
Family commitments	16	9	75
I found employment	11	8	82

## 2.6 Summary

Students' reasons for coming to university continue to remain remarkably stable, despite predicted changes as a result of shifts in the economic environment. Interest in a field and improving their job prospects are high on the agenda of most first year students. Around three-quarters of first year students are clear about the reasons they come to university.

There are somewhat contradictory findings concerning whether students perceive the gap between school and university as great as they did in 1994. On the one hand, student beliefs about the relatively unclear links between school and university work have not shifted noticeably. On the other hand, our findings show that there have been some shifts since 1994 in two areas that suggest that the gap is not as wide as in the past. More students are finding university study more fulfilling than school and fewer are finding it more demanding than school. Students have relatively realistic expectations about the amount of new material they will experience at university; they both expect and find a significant amount of such material.

Some students have a very uncertain start at university, generally through a combination of factors, which can include lack of accurate initial information, poor course choices, failure to get their first choice, and unrealistic expectations of the amount of work and time involved in university study. One in five of the 1999 first year students hoped to change to a different course after their first year, and the survey confirmed a common finding that about a third of first year students seriously consider deferring during their first semester.

### 3. Expectations and realities: stability and change in the first year experience

#### 3.1 The shock of new expectations

An early 'reality shock' occurs for first year students when their first semester marks begin to come in. This is the test of how well they are coping with new material and the requirements of university study. Some are inevitably in for an unpleasant surprise. Students were asked to assess, on the basis of the marks they had already received, an estimate of their average overall mark for the semester. Table 3.1 gives the percentage of students placing themselves in each category.

**Table 3.1** Students' assessments of their average overall mark for semester one, 1999

(N=2 609)

	% of students
Less than 50%	3
50-60%	20
61-70%	37
71-80%	31
81-100%	10

We cannot comment on the accuracy of these assessments, although the distribution gives us some confidence that they are realistic. What we are interested in is how they relate to the expectations students had about their performance at the beginning of the year. Almost half (46 per cent) said their average mark for the semester was about the same as they expected; 18 per cent said that it was higher and 36 per cent said that it was lower. More than one-third of students, therefore, are likely to have to face the fact that they were not performing as well as they expected. They are faced with adjusting their achievement expectations or reassessing their efforts.

## 3.2 Integration and involvement

### 3.2.1 Academic orientation

The six items in Table 3.2 form a scale that we labelled ‘academic orientation’ in 1994. At the time, we noted that students scoring highly on this scale ‘show evidence of taking on the academic values and norms of the university and of their lecturers: their cognitive and intellectual ‘positions’ (Perry 1970) are in tune with the cultivating climate that traditionally characterises higher education (Little 1975)’ (McInnis and James 1995, p.43).

In 1994, students made quite a clear distinction between enjoying the intellectual challenge of their subjects (an item agreed to by 61 per cent of students) and the theoretical content of their subjects (agreed to by only 40 per cent of students). This finding has not shifted in 1999.

The items concerning lectures were of interest in 1994 and they are perhaps of even more interest as universities move towards a greater range of technologies in the delivery of course material, in particular towards putting more lecture material on-line. In 1994, 64 per cent of students found lectures a valuable source of learning and 44 per cent agreed that their intellectual interest was stimulated by lectures. In 1999, considerably fewer students found that lectures were a valuable source of learning for them, a finding that is statistically significant. On the other hand, the percentage of students agreeing that lecturers often stimulated their interest remained about the same. The findings may indicate that lectures are becoming a less important source of information for students who now have more access to other forms of information, especially via the internet.

The other statistically significant difference was the drop in the percentage of students saying that they get a lot of satisfaction from study. This is a somewhat concerning finding, which may reflect various pressures on students that impinge on their capacity to enjoy their studies in 1999.

**Table 3.2 Academic Orientation, 1994–99 (% of students)**

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Disagree		Agree
I enjoy the intellectual challenge of my subjects	1994	12	27	61
	1999	12	27	61
I really enjoy the theoretical content of my subjects	1994	22	39	40
	1999	24	36	40
Lectures often stimulate my interest in the subjects	1994	20	35	44
	1999	19	35	46
I have found most of my subjects really interesting	1994	21	29	51
	1999	20	29	50
Lectures are a valuable source of learning for me	1994	12	24	64
	1999	15	27	58*
I get a lot of satisfaction from studying	1994	22	35	43
	1999	25	35	40**

\* significant at 0.01 \*\* significant at 0.05

### 3.2.2 Academic application

Academic orientation is only part of the explanation as to whether or not students do well at university. Application is also required. The four items in Table 3.3 identify students who are conscientious in their approach to study. In 1995, we commented that responses to these items indicated that students were generally serious in their intent and contradicted to some degree the cynical views of some staff that student were often not concerned to achieve well. We also noted that students in 1994 divided almost equally on the issue of working consistently through the semester, which seemed to suggest that they were being honest about this question.

Responses to two of the items showed little shift from 1994 to 1999. However, the findings indicate that there is a statistically significant increase, to almost 50 per cent, in the proportion of students who agreed that it was difficult to motivate themselves to study, and a significant drop (albeit from a high initial percentage) in the percentage saying they have a strong desire to do well in all their subjects. Together, these findings suggest that a larger proportion of students are finding it difficult to apply themselves to the business of university study.

**Table 3.3 Academic application, 1994–99 (% of students)**

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Disagree		Agree
I worked consistently throughout first semester	1994	39	26	37
	1999	38	25	37
I find it difficult to get myself motivated to study	1994	28	31	42
	1999	23	29	48*
I regularly seek the advice and assistance of the teaching staff	1994	49	30	20
	1999	50	31	19
I have a strong desire to do well in all my subjects	1994	3	14	83
	1999	4	15	81*

\* significant at 0.01

### 3.3 Workload and study habits

#### 3.3.1 The workload—expectations and realities

Students arrive at university with a set of expectations about the nature of university work and life. Perhaps the most crucial of these expectations relate to how much work they think will be required and the extent of demands on their time. If they do not foresee this reasonably accurately, they are likely to be in trouble in terms of time management. Many students have employment commitments and organise their time for study around these commitments and other activities in their life.

Because we found in 1994 that student expectations about university work and study were often not well aligned with the reality, we refined our questions in 1999 to explore expectations and perceived realities in more detail than was sought in 1994. Students were asked to rate on a five-point scale both their expectations and the realities as they perceived them on a series of items related to university work and study. Both the overall means for these scales, and the percentage of students agreeing and disagreeing with the statements are of considerable interest.

Overall, Table 3.4 suggests that students expect that the amount of difficult material they will meet in their course, the amount of work they will be required to do, and the amount of time they will have to spend on study will be moderately high, but not very high. Their expectations about the amount of pressure on them are relatively modest, just over the mid point on a 5-point scale.

In reality, students find after the first semester at university that there is marginally more difficult material, slightly more work and more time studying is required of them, and the pressure is somewhat greater. All of these differences are statistically significant, indicating a gap between expectations and realities, but in some cases

not a very large one. (The very small, but statistically significant difference between expectations and realities in regard to the amount of difficult material in a student's course, results from very consistent ratings of between 3 and 4 on the 5-point scale and a consequent small standard deviation.)

**Table 3.4 Mean ratings for expectations and realities on items relating to university work and study, 1999**

(5=a lot; 1=none at all) (N=2 609)

	Mean rating for expectations	Mean rating for reality	Difference
The amount of difficult material in my course	3.74	3.81	0.07*
The amount of work I am required to do	3.84	4.07	0.23*
The amount of time I would have to spend on study	3.79	3.99	0.20*
Pressure on me throughout the semester	3.50	3.74	0.24*

\* significant at 0.01

This general pattern was relatively consistent across the seven institutions. Given the observations earlier it is worth noting that students in three universities found a significant difference between their expectations and the reality as far as the amount of time they had to spend on study was concerned (the first two at the .01 level; the third at .05 level). In three of the other four universities students did not find a significant difference between their expectations and the reality in regard to the amount of pressure on them. At these three universities there was a statistically significant drop between 1994 and 1999 in the percentage of students who believed that university study was more demanding than school study. It may be, then, that the realistic expectations of these students about the amount of pressure they will face contributes to fewer of them finding university study so demanding at these institutions. While it might be argued that there is less actual pressure at these institutions, this is not the case; the actual pressure at these three institutions (as assessed by students) was in fact in the mid range compared with other universities.

The figures in Table 3.5 help to build a broader picture about expectations and perceived realities. Somewhat less than two thirds of students expected a lot of difficult material, a lot of work and a lot of time required to be spent on study. After one semester, there is little change in regard to the amount of difficult work they actually meet in their courses. However, the percentage finding that a lot of work is required in reality and that a lot of time is required to be spent on study has increased to three-quarters of first year students.

**Table 3.5 Percentages of students expecting 'a lot' and finding in reality 'a lot' on items relating to university work and study, 1999**

(where 'a lot' = a rating of 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale) (N=2 609)

	% of students expecting a lot	% of students finding a lot	Difference
The amount of difficult material in my course	62	64	2
The amount of work I am required to do	65	75	10
The amount of time I would have to spend on study	62	71	9
Pressure on me throughout the semester	49	61	12
Curriculum content that was new to me	74	70	-4
Special assistance available in areas that are new to me	39	33	-6

The most striking difference relates to the amount of pressure on students. Just under half of first year students (49 per cent) come to university expecting that there will be a lot of pressure on them during the semester, but 61 per cent find this turns out to be the case.

In summary:

- Around two thirds of first year students are expecting that they will meet a lot of difficult material in their course, they will be required to do a lot of work and spend a lot of time on study;
- Very few students find that they have been wrong about the amount of difficult work they will meet;
- Around 9–10 per cent of students find that they have under estimated the amount of work they will have to do and the amount of time required for study;
- One in eight students (12 per cent) find more pressure on them than they expected; and
- As we noted in the 1995 report, the belief that Year 12 is the hardest thing they will ever do is still a prevailing myth for a large number of school leavers entering university.

### 3.3.2 Field of study differences

In most fields of study, over 60 per cent of students expected that they would have to spend a lot of time on study. The exceptions were Agriculture students (46 per cent) and Architecture students (52 per cent). These groups of students found that considerably more time was required in reality, as did students in the Health and Science fields of study.

Arts students were about right in their expectations, with just over 60 per cent finding that a lot of time was required. This is considerably less than the 80 per cent of Law students who found that a lot of time was required.

**Table 3.6** Frequency of various study habits, 1994–1999 (% of students)

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Never	Sometimes	Frequently*
Borrow course materials from friends in the same subjects/units	1994	56	36	8
	1999	43	38	19**
Read suggested material in preparation for classes	1994	23	33	44
	1999	23	32	44
Study on the weekends	1994	14	26	60
	1999	20	27	53**
Use web-based resources and information from outside the university	1994	Not included in 1994 survey		
	1999	38	24	39

\* in 1994, this option was 'almost always' \*\* significant at 0.01 level

Table 3.6 shows that on the whole a relatively high proportion of students are quite diligent in their study habits. In 1999, over half frequently worked at the weekends; and 44 per cent frequently prepared for classes by reading suggested material. The slightly different options for response that students had in 1994 and 1999 do not make the findings directly comparable. However, it does appear that more students in 1999 'never' worked at weekends and fewer 'almost always'/frequently studied at weekends. Students' pattern of preparing for classes by reading suggested materials does not appear to have changed.

In regard to the use of web-based resources and information from outside the university, students in 1999 are evenly divided between those who frequently use these resources and those who never use them. This question was not asked in 1994. The overall finding regarding web-based resources hides different patterns of use across fields of study, as shown in the next section.

### **3.4 New dimensions in the student experience: the take-up and impact of new technologies**

A clear change in universities over the past five years has been the increasing exposure of students to a greater range of technologies used in teaching and learning. These include interactive multi-media packages designed specifically for particular disciplines and units, on-line discussion between students, virtual tutoring, the use of the internet for research purposes, and lecture and tutorial material available on-line.

Some uses of technology are largely add-ons to existing teaching tools aimed at enhancing presentation. Others are clearly planned and designed to expand and enhance learning in more substantive ways. In our 1999 survey, we tried to capture information about some of the broad changes and explore students' reactions to them. With the greater use of computers in schools, a high level of home computer ownership and use in Australia and the dramatic increase in internet activity, students coming to university are much more likely than those of only five years ago to be familiar with a range of technologies.

In the 1994 survey, we included several questions about access to computers at university and use of computer-based resources. Almost 42 per cent had not used any computer-based learning resources in 1994. Of those who had, 49 per cent found them useful but only 21 per cent found them very useful.

Questions in the 1999 survey on new technologies were considerably more extensive. A series of questions explored:

- the level of usage;
- whether students regarded their multi-media experience as useful or not;
- students' expectations about whether they would have access to a range of technologies in their teaching/learning; and
- the range of experiences they had in reality.

#### **3.4.1 Access to computers**

In 1999, 83 per cent of students said they had adequate access to computers at university (ranging from 70 per cent to 92 per cent across the seven institutions). Just over 80 per cent of students said they had adequate access to computer equipment at home (ranging from 73 per cent to 85 per cent across the institutions). We did not ask these questions in 1994. We did however ask a more general question about whether students had satisfactory access to computers, laboratories or other specific equipment essential for their study. A high 86 per cent of respondents said that they did.

#### **3.4.2 Teaching and learning technologies: frequency of use**

In our 1999 survey, students were asked how frequently they:

- used the university email system;

- took part in on-line discussion groups;
- worked from home using university email and on-line material; and
- used web-based resources and information specifically designed for the course.

Table 3.7 gives findings for these items:

- Almost 60 per cent of students used university email systems either daily or weekly.
- There is very limited regular use of on-line discussion groups, with only nine per cent of students using them daily or weekly.
- One-third of students worked from home using the university email and on-line material either daily or weekly.
- More than half of the students used web-based resources and information designed specifically for their course daily or weekly.

**Table 3.7** Frequency of use of technologies, 1999 (% of students)

(N=2 609)

	Daily	Weekly	Irregularly
Used the university email system	30	28	42
Used on-line discussion groups	2	7	91
Worked from home using the university email and on-line material	11	22	67
Used web-based resources and information designed specifically for the course	15	37	48

### 3.4.3 Field of study differences

There are clear patterns of use of various teaching and learning technologies across the fields of study, a finding that is not unexpected given the varying nature of the disciplines.

**Table 3.8** Frequency of use of technologies, fields of study differences, 1999

(N=2 609)

	Uni email		On-line discussion with other students		Work at home using uni email & on-line material		Web-based resources designed for course	
	daily/w weekly	Irreg- ularly	daily/w weekly	Irreg- ularly	daily/w weekly	Irreg- ularly	daily/w weekly	Irreg- ularly
Arts	50	50	8	93	24	76	37	62
Business/Admin	53	47	8	92	35	66	59	41
Education	71	29	9	92	28	72	47	53
Health	53	47	8	93	26	73	42	58
Science	63	37	11	89	38	63	57	43
Agriculture	58	43	6	94	22	78	60	40
Architecture	54	46	14	86	25	75	41	59
Law	30	71	8	92	36	64	43	57
Engineering	70	31	12	89	42	58	59	41
Combined degrees	63	37	8	92	39	61	61	39

## University email:

- Engineering students are by far the most frequent daily users of university email (49 per cent use it daily), followed by Science students (35 per cent use it daily). Law students are the least frequent users (13 per cent use it daily).
- When daily and weekly use is combined, Education students are the most regular users, followed by Engineering and Science students (Table 3.8).

## On-line discussion groups:

- On-line discussion groups are infrequently used across all fields of study.
- 13 per cent of Architecture students use discussion groups weekly, making them the most regular (daily and weekly) users among all fields of study.
- On-line discussion groups are least frequently (daily and weekly) used by Agriculture students (Table 3.8).

## Working from home using university email and on-line materials:

- Engineering students most regularly work from home using the university email and on-line material (42 per cent); Agriculture and Arts students do so least regularly (Table 3.8).

Use of web-based resources and information specifically designed for the course:

- The most regular users (daily or weekly) are Agriculture, Combined degree, Science and Engineering students.
- Engineering students, those in combined degrees, Business/Administration students and Science students have relatively high daily use of web-based resources and information specifically designed for the course.
- Architecture students have a very low daily use.

### 3.4.4 Student perceptions of usefulness of the new technologies

Students were asked how useful (on a five-point scale) they found the following educational tools within their course:

- web-based resources/information designed specifically for the course, accessed from home;
- web-based resources/information designed specifically for the course, accessed at university;
- interactive multimedia software designed specifically for the course;
- on-line discussion groups with other students; and
- virtual tutoring (electronic access to tutoring support).

The question included an option for students to respond that they had not used the tools at all.

We first present findings regarding those who said they had *not* used a particular tool at all:

- 40 per cent of students said they had not used web-based resources or information designed specifically for the course, accessed from home;
- 25 per cent said they had not used web-based resources or information designed specifically for the course, accessed at university;
- 42 per cent said they had not used interactive multi-media software designed specially for the course;
- 76 per cent said they had not used on-line discussion groups with other students; and
- 80 per cent said they had not used virtual tutoring (electronic access to tutoring support).

As far as use of web-based resources and information specifically designed for a course is concerned, just over half of the 1999 first years said that they regularly used such resources. It seems that they are more likely to access them at university than at home. There are also indications that a high percentage of students who use such web-based resources use them regularly (60 per cent said they had used them and almost 52 per cent said they used them daily or weekly).

Table 3.9 shows the percentage of the total number of students who indicated they had used the learning tool, and the percentage of 'users' who say they found the tool useful (a rating of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale) and of little use (ratings of 1 and 2).

**Table 3.9 Percentages of students who had used a learning tool and found it useful or of little use**

(total N=2 609)

Learning tool	% of total students who had used tool	% who found tool of little use*	% who found tool useful*
Web-based resources or information designed specifically for the course, accessed from home	60	16	64
Web-based resources or information designed specifically for the course, accessed at university	75	16	59
Interactive multi-media software designed specially for the course	58	23	46
On-line discussion groups with other students	25	54	19
Virtual tutoring (electronic access to tutoring support)	20	46	27

\* these are percentages for 'users' only

The more widely used learning tools (web-based resources and interactive multimedia software) are regarded as more useful than the less widely used (on-line discussion groups and virtual tutoring). Perhaps, at present, lack of familiarity with the less widely available tools influences how students perceive their usefulness. It will be interesting to see if more widespread development and greater student familiarity with on-line discussion groups and virtual tutoring leads to them being perceived as more useful.

### 3.5 New technologies: expectations and realities

Overall, only a minority of students expected they would encounter a good deal of new technologies in teaching and learning in their courses. A substantially larger proportion found in reality substantial use of interactive multimedia software and web-based resources for study purposes (Table 3.10). In general, what they expected fell into the middle range of a 5-point scale which ranged from 'a lot' to 'none at all'. Mean ratings on the five-point scale for what they found in reality increased to around 3.5-3.6 for the two technologies mentioned above; those for 'on-line learning at my own pace', and 'on-line discussion with other students' remained below the mid-point (Table 3.10).

Whereas just over a third of students expected a lot of use of multimedia software in teaching and learning, just over a half found a lot in reality. Similarly, around 20

per cent of students found more web-based resources for study purposes than they had anticipated. Developments in the use of on-line learning at a student's own pace and on-line discussions between students appear as yet to be quite modest. Just over one-quarter of students found a lot of the former and less than 20 per cent of students found a lot of the latter (Table 3.10).

**Table 3.10 New technologies in teaching and learning: expectations and realities, 1999**

(% of students) and mean ratings on a 5point scale from 5= 'a lot' to 1= 'none at all'  
(N=2 609)

	Expecting a lot	Finding a lot in reality	Difference %
Interactive multimedia software used in teaching and learning	36 (3.21)	52 (3.47)	16 (0.26)
On-line learning at my own pace	20 (2.52)	28 (2.71)	8 (0.19)
On-line discussion with other students	16 (2.24)	18 (2.24)	2 (0)
Web-based resources for study purposes	39 (3.19)	59 (3.62)	20 (0.43)

### 3.5.1 Field of study differences

As we might expect, students in different fields of study had varying expectations and found different realities in regard to the use of teaching and learning technologies. Table 3.11 shows findings for the four items.

Interactive multimedia software used in teaching and learning:

- Students in different fields of study found substantial variations in the use of interactive multimedia software. In Agriculture, more than two thirds found 'a lot' (ratings of four and 5 on a 5-point scale). It is noteworthy that Agriculture students had the lowest initial expectations of use. Nearly 60 per cent of students in Science, Education, Business/Administration and Engineering found a lot of use.
- In all cases, the percentage of students finding a lot of use of interactive multimedia software was a significant increase on the percentage expecting a lot, although almost half of the Engineering students had anticipated widespread use. Only in Law were students' expectations close to the reality, with around a third of students anticipating and finding a lot of use of interactive multimedia software.

**Table 3.11** Students finding 'a lot' (ratings of 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale) of various teaching and learning technologies: fields of study differences, 1999 (% of students)

(N=2 609)

Field of study	Interactive multimedia in teaching/ learning	On-line learning at own pace	On-line discussion with other students	Web-based resources for study purposes
Arts	44	21	19	53
Business/Admin	56	33	22	64
Education	60	31	24	61
Health	54	27	21	50
Science	60	34	13	64
Agriculture	68	31	18	68
Architecture	38	22	16	34
Law	34	17	9	60
Engineering	57	32	13	62
Combined degrees	55	26	13	66

On-line learning at student's own pace:

- The total of 28 per cent of students who found a lot of on-line learning at their own pace were distributed unevenly across the fields of study (Table 3.11). The highest percentages were in Science (34 per cent), Business/Administration (33 per cent) and Engineering (32 per cent). The lowest percentage was in Law (17 per cent).

On-line discussions with other students:

- One-quarter of Education students said there was a lot of on-line discussion with other students, the highest percentage of all fields of study. About one-fifth of Business/Administration and Health students thought there was a lot. A low nine per cent of Law students experienced a lot of on-line discussion with other students (Table 3.11).

Web-based resources for study purposes:

- There appear to be widespread opportunities for integration of web-based resources into the learning experiences of first year students (Table 3.11). Over 50 per cent of students in all fields of study except Architecture said there were a lot of such resources, reaching as high as two thirds of students in Agriculture and those doing Combined degrees.

### 3.6 Summary

At the end of the first semester and with their first set of academic results, students have a chance to assess whether their achievement expectations have been realistic and their efforts have been sufficient. On the whole, we found little change in the level of students' academic orientation or their academic application from 1994 to 1999. Around 60 per cent continue to enjoy the intellectual challenge of their subjects and around 40 per cent the theoretical content of their subjects. There are some indications of shifts in attitudes towards lectures, with a significant decrease in the percentage of students finding that lectures are a valuable source of learning. The fact that students increasingly have access to sources of information other than lectures is likely to contribute to this finding. A rather more concerning finding is the drop in the percentage of students who say that they get a lot of satisfaction from study; so too is the greater number of students who find it difficult to motivate themselves to study.

On the whole, student expectations about the amount of work they are required to do, the amount of time they have to spend on study and the pressure on them are not too far off the mark, although there is a tendency to under-estimate rather than over-estimate what is expected of them, especially as far as general pressure of work is concerned. As in 1994, the general impression is that the majority students are diligent in their approach to their work.

The new set of questions regarding the use of teaching and learning technologies, included in the 1999 survey, revealed some predictable trends, notwithstanding somewhat different patterns of use across the fields of study. Web-based resources and information designed specifically for courses, and interactive multi-media software designed specifically for courses are relatively widespread (although the percentage of students who have not as yet used these learning tools varies from 25 per cent to over 40 per cent). On-line discussion groups and virtual tutoring are much less well developed and used by a relatively small minority of students.

## 4. Experiencing the learning community

There are some indications, as well as some speculation based on anecdotal evidence, that the nature of the first year university experience is changing because students are spending less time on campus. They either seek, or have in their lives, an increasing number of distractions from study. This is thought to be partly a consequence of more students taking on part-time work, both for necessity and through choice. It is also the case that with more on-line material available, students do not have to spend time on campus in order to study and to have access to teaching and learning resources. There is some concern that a combination of factors will lead to students feeling less of a sense of connection with their institution and perhaps less satisfied with their university experience. This chapter discusses findings from the 1999 survey relevant to these issues.

### 4.1 How students spend their time

#### 4.1.1 Time on campus

In 1994, 78 per cent of the sample usually spent four or five days per week on campus. When we asked the same question in 1999, we found that this figure had reduced by 11 per cent with all of the decrease attributable to fewer people spending five days per week on campus. (Table 4.1). Table 4.1 sets out the comparison between the two surveys. The mean number of days per week spent on campus in 1994 was 4.38 and in 1999, 4.07.

**Table 4.1** Number of days per week usually spent on campus, 1994-1999 (% of students)

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

	1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 days	6 days	7 days
1994	1	4	12	31	47	2	4
1999	3	6	21	31	36	1	3

#### 4.1.2 Course contact hours

The mean number of course contact hours for students in the 1994 sample was 17.6; in 1999 it was 17.1. Table 4.2 sets out the comparisons between course contact hours for 1994 and 1999. The slight drop in the overall mean appears to

result from the slightly smaller proportion who have more than 21 contact hours per week and the greater number who have between 11 and 15 contact hours.

**Table 4.2 Course contact hours per week, 1994–1999**

(% of students) (1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

	1-5 hrs	6-10 hrs	11-15 hrs	16-20 hrs	21-25 hrs	26-30 hrs	31+ hrs
1994	2	10	30	24	21	9	2
1999	2	10	36	24	20	7	2

### 4.1.3 Study habits and social interaction

In 1994, we noted that the ‘social nature of the university experience has the potential for contributing positively to academic performance, and more generally should influence the individual’s sense of competence’ (McInnis and James 1995, p. 47). On the other hand, social involvement can undermine academic achievement. In 1994, we found that while most students were reasonably gregarious, a proportion appeared to be socially isolated. Almost one-quarter said that they had not made close friends at university; more than one-quarter agreed that they generally kept to themselves at university. Table 4.3 compares the responses of students in 1994 and 1999. It suggests that very little has changed in this regard.

**Table 4.3 Study habits and social interaction, 1994–1999**

5-point scale collapsed to 3 points (% of students)(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Disagree	Agree
I’m not particularly interested in the extra-curricular activities/facilities	1994	44	28
	1999	43	31
I generally keep to myself at university	1994	52	22
	1999	49	24
I have not made close friends at university	1994	63	15
	1999	62	15
I would like to make more use of university facilities if I could	1994	15	29
	1999	16	26
Participating in class discussions doesn’t seem worthwhile	1994	70	20
	1999	68	21
I feel very uncomfortable participating in group discussions	1994	52	23
	1999	52	23

The final two items in this scale refer to engagement in learning situations involving others. Again there appears to be very little change in the experience of students in 1994 and 1999 in regard to the two items. The majority of students (70 per cent in 1994 and 68 per cent in 1999) disagree with the statement that participating in class discussion does not seem worthwhile, and only a small minority (10–11 per cent) agree. On the other hand, in both 1994 and 1999, a quarter of the students do not feel comfortable participating in group discussions. Most universities have engaged in staff development programmes to increase the range of strategies that academic staff can use to engage students in group discussion, but it does not as yet seem to have had a noticeable impact on the proportion of students who feel comfortable in such situations.

#### 4.1.4 Learning together: working with others

In 1994, we found that almost a third of students (30 per cent) hardly ever, or never, worked with other students on areas of study where they had problems and over a third (36 per cent) hardly ever or never got together with other students to discuss subjects. In 1999, we changed these questions slightly so a direct comparison is not possible. The 1999 findings indicate that 44 per cent of students work with other students on areas of study where they have problems either daily or weekly and 48 per cent get together with other students to discuss subjects/units daily or weekly. On the other hand, over 50 per cent of students engage in these activities ‘irregularly’.

#### 4.1.5 Collaborative study with other students

In 1999, we asked what expectations students had about opportunities for working with others and specifically for ‘collaborative study’. The expectations were quite modest, falling on the mid-point of a 5-point scale between none and ‘a lot’. The reality also was assessed as being very close to the mid point.

The findings regarding expectations about collaborative work with other students (Table 4.4) were relatively similar across fields of study, with little variation around roughly a quarter of students expecting a lot of such work. The realities they found, however, varied considerably. More students in Agriculture, Law and Education said they found opportunities for collaborative study; fewer students in Arts and Science did so. Students in Law and Agriculture found significantly more opportunities than they expected. Arts, Science and Engineering students found roughly what they had expected.

Summarising 1999 institution and field of study findings about working with other students:

- students from Regional University, the university with the highest proportion of residential students, most frequently worked with other students on problems and got together to discuss subjects;
- over 50 per cent of students in Health, Agriculture, Architecture and Engineering fields of study said that they regularly worked with other students on course areas where they had problems; almost 50 per cent of Science

students did so. However, only 29 per cent of Arts students said that they regularly worked in this way; and

- 60 per cent of Education and Architecture students said that they regularly got together with other students to discuss subjects. Only 40 per cent of Business/Administration students did so.

**Table 4.4** % of students in different fields of study indicating that they expected 'a lot' and found 'a lot' of collaborative study with other students, 1999

(N=2 609)

	Expecting a lot	Finding a lot	Difference (%)
Arts	25	25	0
Business/Admin	28	33	5
Education	29	40	11
Health	28	38	10
Science	25	25	0
Agriculture	25	42	17
Architecture	23	34	11
Law	22	40	18
Engineering	29	30	1
Combined degrees	28	28	0

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## 4.2 The growing issue of students in paid employment

The proportion of students engaged in part-time and casual employment and the extent to which students rely on paid work as a source of income have changed quite considerably since the 1994 survey. We first present some overall findings, before discussing changes for different demographic groups, and finally outline findings regarding the impact of participation in part-time/casual work on attitudes of full-time students to university study and life.

In 1994, 26 per cent of the sample said that part-time and casual work was their only or main source of income. This figure has increased to 37 per cent in 1999 (Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5** Paid work as a source of income for students, 1994 and 1999 (% of students)

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Only source	Main source	Minor source	Not a source
Full-time work	1994	3	2	0	94
	1999	2	2	1	95*
Part-time/	1994	4	22	22	52
Casual work	1999	9	27	23	40*

\* significant difference at 0.01 level

Further analysis of findings concerning participation in paid employment and the average number of hours worked reveals different patterns for student subgroups. The findings discussed below relate to full-time students, partly because they represent the majority of respondents in both surveys and we can be most confident about findings regarding this large group. More importantly, however, concerns about the amount of time students spend in paid employment and hence 'away' from study are generally couched in terms of the impact on full-time students. The situations of part-time students are quite different since it is expected that many will be employed, either full-time or part-time. However, our focus on full-time students in this section in no way denies the difficulties that some part-time students experience in negotiating the demands of work and study and the importance of understanding the impact of these difficulties.

### 4.3 Full-time students and paid employment

If we make the assumption that respondents who (for whatever reason) failed to provide details of employment hours ('missing' observations) were not actually working, then the proportion of full-time students working no hours at all dropped from 58 per cent in 1994 to 49 per cent in 1999. A conservative way of estimating change in the hours spent in part-time employment, however, is to concentrate only on those respondents who indicated they worked one or more hours each week (as displayed in Table 4.6). This Table shows an appreciable shift in the number of hours full-time students are committing to paid work. For example, the proportion of students working between one and ten hours per week has dropped substantially from 60 per cent (of all those indicating they were working) in 1994 to just under 49 per cent in 1999. Conversely, the proportion of students working for eleven hours or more in paid employment rose from 40 per cent in 1994 to just over half of respondents in 1999.

In terms of the mean number of hours worked per week, this represents an increase from 11.04 hours to 12.59 hours (a 14 per cent increase in employment hours) per full-time student (when measured 'conservatively') for those respondents only who indicated they *were* engaged in paid employment. If we include those who indicated they were not engaged in any paid employment and 'missings' whom we assume were not working, the mean number of hours per week for *all* full-time students

rises from 4.69 hours in 1994 to 6.46 hours in 1999. This translates as an average increase in time spent in paid employment of just under 38 per cent across the board for *all* full time students.

**Table 4.6 Hours spent in paid work in a typical university week, 1994 and 1999**

(% of all full-time enrolled students who indicated they were in paid employment for one or more hours per week) (1994 n=1 572; 1999 n=1 253)

	1-5 hrs	6-10 hrs	11-15 hrs	16-20 hrs	21-25 hrs	26-30 hrs	31 hrs or more
1994	22	38	20	12	4	2	2
1999	16	32	25	17	5	2	3

The differences, both in the *proportions* of various demographic groups which decided to take on paid employment, and in the *average hours* spent in paid employment (for those who have made the decision to work), are quite pronounced. Likewise, there are important differences in both these measurements between 1994 and 1999, differences which suggest an uneven pattern of commitment to part-time work between various demographic groups. Data for selected demographic groups are presented in Table 4.7.

To summarise the data in Table 4.7:

- Overall, there has been a 9 per cent increase in the proportion of full-time students engaged in paid employment and a 14 per cent increase in the mean number of hours they work.
- There are no major differences between females and males in this trend, although it appears that more females work and they work slightly more hours than do males.
- The proportions of younger students (those under 25 years) in paid employment has increased significantly; respondents 19 years and under and 25–29 year olds show the greatest increase in mean hours, although under 19 years olds work fewer hours on average than older age groups.
- Field of study patterns are mixed, with noteworthy increases in the proportion of Architecture students engaged in paid employment and large increases in the number of mean hours worked for Agriculture and Architecture students, albeit from a low base for Agriculture students. Arts, Business and Administration, and Science students all show greater increases in hours worked than the average for all full-time students. We can speculate that at least some of these students are trying to enhance their chances of future employment by seeking paid work in their own, or a related field of study.
- Students at Established, Suburban, New and Consolidated Universities show significant increases in the proportion engaged in paid employment.
- Regional University is the only one of the seven institutions that does not have at least half of their first year full-time students engaged in paid employment; there has been an increase in the proportion at this university from 19 per cent

of students in 1994 to 23 per cent in 1999. A contributing factor to the low proportion in paid employment may be lack of appropriate jobs in the area.

- Significantly more HECS students than full-fee paying overseas students are engaged in paid employment, although there has been a significant increase in the proportion of both groups working and a significant increase in the average number of hours worked for HECS students (but not for full-fee paying overseas students). Data for domestic full-fee paying students are only available for 1999, and although the numbers are low, the results suggest that the proportion of this group in paid employment is the same as for the HECS students, and the hours they work are similar to both the HECS and overseas full-fee paying students.
- Fewer respondents whose secondary schooling was at a government school are engaged in paid employment compared to those from Catholic and independent schools, although ex-government school students show the greatest increase in the proportion working. The increase in mean hours is above the average for ex-Catholic school students.
- More students who speak only English at home than LOTE students are engaged in paid employment; however the two groups work about the same average number of hours and very close to the average number of hours for all full-time students.

**Table 4.7** Proportion of full-time students in paid work, and employed students' hours in paid work in a typical university week; selected demographic groups, 1994

(N=3 695) and 1999 (N=2 449)

	Proportion in Paid Employment			Mean Hours Paid Employment/Week		
	1994	1999	Change	1994	1999	Change
	N=3695	N=2449	(%age pts.)+	N=1572	N=1253	(%)
Whole sample	43	51	9*	11.04	12.59	14*
Gender						
Males	40	49	9*	10.69	12.26	15*
Females	44	53	9*	11.16	12.78	15*
Age Group						
19 years or less	44	52	8*	10.01	11.97	20*
20-24 years	40	50	10*	13.60	13.97	3
25-29 years	37	49	11	15.35	19.56	27*
30 years or over	40	42	2	17.58	16.46	-6
Field of Study						
Agriculture	26	28	2	6.38	10.27	61*
Architecture	43	60	17*	10.62	15.14	43*
Law	55	54	- 2	14.73	14.75	0
Arts	46	57	11*	11.45	14.16	24*
Bus/Admin.	45	53	8*	11.72	13.61	16*
Education	43	51	8	11.19	11.94	7
Health Sciences	44	49	6	11.81	12.96	10
Science	38	46	9*	9.59	11.44	19*
Engineering	30	35	5	10.38	11.09	7
Combined Degree	47	57	10*	10.00	11.32	13*

(continued)

Table 4.7 Proportion of full-time students in paid work, and employed students' hours in paid work in a typical university week; selected demographic groups, 1994 (continued)

	Proportion in Paid Employment			Mean Hours Paid Employment/Week		
	1994	1999	Change	1994	1999	Change
	N=3695	N=2449	(%age pts.)+	N=1572	N=1253	(%)
University						
Established	44	52	8*	8.87	10.06	13*
Suburban	39	51	12*	11.19	12.92	15*
New	44	55	11*	11.41	13.19	16*
International	45	58	12	10.29	12.39	20*
Regional	19	23	4	10.18	10.51	3
Applied	53	55	2	12.75	14.61	15*
	44	53	9*	12.90	13.24	3
Consolidated						
Fee Paying Status						
HECS students	44	53	9*	10.96	12.61	15*
Full Fee Paying OS	19	29	10*	13.49	12.86	-5
Secondary Schooling						
Catholic	51	58	7*	11.31	13.24	17*
Independent	50	56	6*	10.18	11.36	12*
Government	37	47	11*	11.31	12.67	12*
Language spoken in home						
LOTE	33	38	5*	11.09	12.58	13
English at home only	47	55	8*	11.00	12.64	15*

\* Statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better +NB Percentage changes rounded

The general explanation for the overall shifts in engagement in paid employment are likely to be found in a number of factors—increased financial pressures on students, lifestyle choices and, for school leavers, a carry-over of employment patterns established while they were at school. What we do not know from this survey is the type of employment students are engaged in and therefore we cannot speculate beyond these general reasons. However, we can make some further observations.

As mentioned above, some paid employment may reflect a choice to get work experience in order to enhance future employment, or may even be a requirement of a course. The data refer to a 'typical university week' and it is reasonable to assume that some students, perhaps especially those who live in rural and regional areas, or who return to rural and regional areas during vacations, work in family or other businesses during this time. So, they may rely on income from part-time or even full-time employment to get them through their course but they may not show up in our findings.

A further important aspect of employment is the difference between potential impacts on study time of part-time work and highly casualised work, which we can assume some, perhaps many, students are involved in. On the whole, it is generally easier to organise study commitments around part-time work at set hours. Casual work hours can be much less predictable and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that students, in common with other casual workers, often feel they cannot say no to employers' requests—which may well come at short notice—because they are afraid they will not be contacted to work again.

All of these issues—the nature of the work that students are engaged in, the different impacts of part-time and casual work, and different patterns of work that students undertake throughout the year—require further investigation.

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## 4.4 Full-time students employed in 1999

A further analysis of full-time students who were employed in 1999 suggested that age was a crucial variable; not surprisingly, somewhat different patterns are apparent for different age groups. The following discussion therefore focuses on three age groups: students aged 19 years and younger, 20–24 year olds and those 25 years and older.

### 4.4.1 Students aged 19 years and younger

For this younger age group, the higher the parental education level, the more likely students are to be in paid employment. The reverse is also true. The general finding is consistent with the notion that for offspring of parents with less 'educational capital', going to university represents a bigger investment than for offspring of parents with higher levels of education. One possible explanation is that students with less educational capital are perhaps less ready to put their university career 'at risk' by engaging in part-time work.

Full-time students whose secondary schooling was at a Catholic or independent secondary school are more likely than ex-government school students to have a paid job (58 per cent compared with 48 per cent).

Students 19 years and under living with their family are more likely to have a paid job than those who have other accommodation arrangements. However, those who do work tend to work fewer hours than employed students living away from home. The latter finding is likely to be because part-time and casual earnings generally contribute to a student's accommodation expenses. This age cohort from households where a language other than English is spoken (LOTE students) are

less likely to be in paid employment than those from households where English is the only language spoken (40 per cent compared with 55 per cent). If we exclude full fee paying overseas students from the calculation, the figures are 44 per cent compared with 55 per cent.

Excluding full fee paying overseas students (who in many ways are a special group), International University has the highest proportion of full-time students aged 19 years and under engaged in paid employment (69 per cent) and Regional University has the lowest proportion (21 per cent). Again excluding full fee paying overseas students, students born in Asia are less likely than other students to be in paid work except for students born in Hong Kong (48 per cent). The proportion of full-time Australian-born students in paid employment (55 per cent) is about the average for the whole group, and students born in the United Kingdom and Ireland have a higher participation rate (62 per cent) than the average.

#### **4.4.2 20–24 year olds**

Our sample sizes in the older age groups are considerably smaller than for those aged 19 years and under. There are fewer clear patterns emerging for this age group; nevertheless some significant relationships are apparent. The link between level of parents' education and student engagement in paid work, which emerged for the younger age group, does not hold for older age groups. As with the younger age group, LOTE students are less likely than other students to be in paid employment.

Consolidated University has the highest proportion of students in this age group in paid employment (68 per cent) and Regional and Established Universities have the lowest (27 per cent and 28 per cent respectively).

There is a suggestion of a trend for students living with parents to work fewer hours than those who live away from their families, but the difference does not reach statistical significance.

#### **4.4.3 Aged 25 years and over**

The only trend to emerge in this age group was that relating to LOTE students. As with other age groups, fewer LOTE students tend to be engaged in paid employment; however the difference is not statistically significant. In addition, students aged 25 years who are in paid employment tend to enjoy their course more than those not in paid employment. This is perhaps not unexpected. Students coming to a course later in life tend to be more certain of their choices, perhaps more committed. They are also more likely to have had more employment experience than have younger students and we could speculate that some may have employment related to their course.

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### **4.5 Paid work and attitudes towards university life and study, 1999**

The extent to which full-time students are engaged in paid work and the increase in the mean number of hours worked per week represent a significant area of change

for first year students over the past five years. What does this mean for their experience of university life and study? Our findings suggest that for younger students, those aged 19 years and under:

- Generally speaking there is an inverse relationship between the number of days spent on campus and the likelihood of being in paid employment.
- The greater the worries about money the more likely students are to work longer hours.
- Students in paid work tend not to work with other students on areas of their course.
- Students in paid work are less likely to agree that they have ‘worked consistently (in their course) through the semester’ and less likely to agree that ‘teaching staff are good at explaining things’.
- Those who have changed course during their first semester are working fewer hours.
- Students who work longer hours tend to anticipate getting lower marks.
- Students who have considered deferring tend to work longer hours.
- Students who work longer hours tend to engage in fewer course contact hours.

In regard to the relationship between considering deferring and working longer hours, we cannot tell from the data if the amount of work compounds the tendency to think of deferring but we do know that financial issues are associated with discontinuation. An alternative explanation is that students who are thinking of deferring increase their working hours to keep their options open.

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## 4.6 Summary

Overall, there is some support for the notion that university study occupies a smaller proportion of students’ lives than it did in 1994. Fewer students are spending five days per week at university; average course contact hours have dropped slightly since 1994. However, the most striking findings relate to the increased proportion of students who are engaged in full-time study and part-time work, and an increase in the average number of hours students are employed. Our findings suggest a pattern of somewhat less attachment and commitment to aspects of university life and study on the part of those who work longer hours in paid employment. The impact of the changes, especially on how students experience their time at university, requires close monitoring over the coming years.

## 5. Trends in perceptions of teaching and support services

In 1994, we talked about a series of ‘fundamental divides’ in the classroom, between what students appeared to expect and want and what academic staff were providing in their teaching. We made the point that some conflict and tension was inevitable as students adjusted to new learning environments, however, we reported that there were divides arising from ‘confusion of purpose, unrealistic and inappropriate expectations of performance, and a lack of genuine commitment to teaching and learning by both academics and students’ that operated as ‘substantial impediments to the effective education of first year students’ (McInnis and James 1995, p.55).

A high proportion of students in the 1994 survey were quite negative about the teaching they experienced in their first year. They expressed a number of concerns, including the extent to which staff were able to explain things clearly, staff enthusiasm for the subjects they were teaching and the extent to which staff tried to make subjects interesting.

Table 5.1 sets out the 1994 and the 1999 findings for a number of items relating the student perceptions of teaching. Compared with student perceptions in 1994:

- Student perceptions of the overall quality of teaching have not changed, with two thirds of students agreeing that the quality of teaching is generally good.
- There has been no change in student perceptions of staff efforts to make subjects interesting (50 per cent of students), staff ability to explain things (around 48 per cent of students) or staff efforts to understand the difficulties students may be having (this remains at the relatively low level of 37 per cent of students).
- As far as staff helpfulness is concerned, just over 60 per cent of students continue to see staff as approachable; however, there is a significant drop (from 45 per cent to 38 per cent) in their perceptions of staff availability to discuss their work.
- There has been a reduction in student perceptions of the extent to which staff usually give helpful feedback on student progress and take an interest in student progress.

In summary, it appears that the areas where perceptions are more negative than in 1994 relate to staff availability, especially to discuss student work and give helpful feedback on student progress.

**Table 5.1 Perceptions of teaching, 1994 and 1999, 5-point scale collapsed to 3 points (% of students)**

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Disagree		Agree
Staff try hard to make the subjects interesting	1994	17	34	50
	1999	17	34	50
The teaching staff are good at explaining things	1994	16	38	47
	1999	17	35	48
Staff are enthusiastic about the subjects they teach	1994	13	34	53
	1999	12	32	56
Most of the academic staff are approachable	1994	12	26	62
	1999	12	26	62
Staff are usually available to discuss my work	1994	21	34	45
	1999	25	37	38*
Teaching staff here usually give helpful feedback on my progress	1994	40	32	28
	1999	40	34	25
Staff make a real effort to understand difficulties students may be having	1994	28	36	36
	1999	28	35	37
Most academic staff in my subjects take an interest in my progress	1994	44	32	24
	1999	47	32	21*
The quality of teaching in my course is generally good	1994	9	25	66
	1999	9	24	67

\* significant difference at 0.01 level

## 5.1 Perceptions of workload

Effective learning is less likely to occur when students perceive themselves as overloaded with work. Students in the 1994 survey were relatively evenly divided about their workload. Table 5.2 compares findings for 1994 and 1999. There are some indications that students in 1999 are finding the workload somewhat more demanding than did students in 1994, especially in regard to the number of topics which courses aim to cover. However, the general finding that students were relatively evenly divided in their perceptions of the overall workload as 'too heavy' or not remained, with about one-third agreeing and one-third disagreeing.

**Table 5.2 Perceptions of workload, 1994 and 1999 (% of students)**  
(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Disagree		Agree
My course workload is too heavy	1994	34	34	32
	1999	31	37	32
The volume of work means that I can't comprehend it all thoroughly	1994	31	29	40
	1999	25	31	44*
The number of contact hours makes it difficult to complete tasks set for classes	1994	49	28	24
	1999	48	29	23
The workload is not challenging enough for me	1994	77	17	7
	1999	78	17	6
It seems to me that the syllabus tries to cover too many topics	1994	32	33	35
	1999	27	35	38*

\* significant difference at 0.01 level

## 5.2 Perceptions of the course overall

Responses to general questions about levels of satisfaction often provide useful summaries of overall attitudes and perceptions. Both the 1994 and 1999 surveys included several such questions. Table 5.3 indicates that despite the changes we have identified in perceptions of academic staff availability, opportunities for useful feedback on their work and a somewhat heavier workload, the general levels of student satisfaction have increased slightly since 1994. The percentage of students saying they are enjoying their course has increased from 61 to 64 per cent; and the percentage who are very satisfied with their university experience to date has increased from 61 to 63 per cent.

**Table 5.3 Student perceptions of their course overall, 1994 and 1999 (% of students)**

(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609)

		Disagree		Agree
I am finding my course intellectually stimulating	1994	12	25	63
	199	10	26	63
Overall, I am really enjoying my course	1994	15	24	61
	1999	13	23	64*
Overall, I am very satisfied with my university experience so far	1994	15	23	61
	1999	14	24	63**

\* significant difference at 0.01 level \*\*significant difference at 0.05 level

### 5.3 Use of student support services

In 1994 we included questions about awareness of student services, how often students had used a range of services and how valuable they had found them to be. Students were generally well informed about the services offered by their universities. However, only a minority had used specific services. Campus libraries and cafeterias were assessed as the most valuable services.

Given the relatively small percentage of students who had used individual services, we decided not to include such detailed questions in the 1999 survey and merely asked students whether they had used any of a range of services commonly found on campuses. The results are given in Table 5.4, which shows that apart from the expected high use of student union cafeteria and catering services, the next most used services are library support services (40 per cent of students), student union sports facilities (26 per cent), student union clubs (23 per cent), study skills assistance (14 per cent), employment services (12 per cent), health services (9 per cent) and counselling services (7 per cent).

**Table 5.4 Student use of support services, 1999**

(% of students used)

Service	%	Service	%
Child care	1	Support for international students	2
Pastoral/religious care	2	Women's resource/support centre	4
English language resource/support services	3	Student housing service	7
Financial aid	4	Employment service	12
Counselling service	7	Study skills assistance	14
Health service	9	Student union clubs	23
Library support service	40	Student union sports facilities	26
		Student union cafeteria/catering service	64

### 5.4 Summary

As in 1994, around two thirds of students in 1999 regard the quality of teaching as good. There has been little change in the degree to which they see staff as interested and approachable; however fewer students regard staff as readily available for discussions about work and for general feedback on academic progress. This accords with other research showing increased pressure on staff time. Students are relatively evenly divided about whether they see the workload as too heavy or not.

The 1994 findings that about two thirds of students are satisfied with their university experience, find their course intellectually stimulating and enjoy their course, were repeated in 1999.

## 6. Institutional responses to the issues of transition

In 'First Year on Campus', we included a brief general review of the range and types of institutional strategies and approaches which universities had in place for responding to the needs of first year students. At that time, we characterised the approaches as falling into three broad categories—compensatory, foundational and enrichment. Compensatory and foundational approaches stem from two different sets of assumptions about the nature of first year problems. We discussed these two sets of strategies under headings of: transition programmes; access and success—initiatives for identifiable groups; bridging gaps; learning and academic skills units; and foundation years and foundation subjects.

In re-visiting the first year experience five years on, we were interested to identify recent trends in institutional responses and what, if any, changes had occurred since the 1994 survey. Since the release of our earlier report, there has been a great deal of discussion in universities concerning the nature of the first year experience. A number of conferences, both national and international, have highlighted a variety of issues and showcased a diverse range of strategies developed to respond to them. Papers from these conferences reflect the variety of approaches and the different—levels at which they have been developed. Some are faculty based; some are subject based; some are pilot programmes; some are integrated into the curriculum to varying degrees. The winner of one of the Australian Awards for University Teaching in 1999 went to a university for their First Year Experience Programme.

Given the significant range of programmes and approaches, we were aware that to thoroughly survey and describe in any detail the responses likely to be found across the seven universities, their faculties and departments, would be a formidable task. To be in any way comprehensive, we would have had to cast a very wide net. Furthermore, evaluating institutional responses was not a primary focus for the present study.

We therefore opted for a broad approach aimed at identifying general trends. A brief telephone survey was conducted with a small number of people at each of the participating institutions. In most cases, those surveyed included informants from two of the following categories: academic staff, student support services staff and university administration. The survey aimed to identify (a) general policy directions over the past few years in regard to teaching and support services for first year students and (b) any new initiatives that are being implemented or planned. We were especially interested in who was responsible for and/or accountable for implementing any new policies and whether there were any mechanisms in place for evaluating the effectiveness of new policies and practices.

We first discuss some general conclusions from the telephone survey and then briefly describe different approaches via a series of case studies.

## 6.1 Trends in teaching and learning support

Overall, greater attention is being paid to how students in all years of study experience their time at university. Concerns about student attrition and an increasingly competitive higher education environment have motivated some of the developments. The consultations indicated that all of the participating universities had an emphasis on the first year of study. However, not all have instituted what might be regarded as a 'separate' or special programme aimed at the first year of study. While some institutions opted for a specific and special emphasis on transition to university study and the first year, others tend to focus on a student's total academic experience, with first year viewed within this overall context. The 'total student experience' approach was more common than the specific transition/first year approach amongst the institutions included in the study.

Typical of the 'total experience' approach is the university that is adopting a developmental approach from pre-university to post-graduate level. It is based on a belief that students do not necessarily come to university with all the skills required, and that one of the university's roles is to facilitate the development of such skills. Strategies are being developed across the whole of a student's candidature, starting before his or her arrival at the institution.

An example of a special focus on the first year experience is the university that has instituted a First Year Academic Orientation Plan that incorporates a structured approach based on a model of change with the following objectives:

- To familiarise students with the university.
- To develop students' sense of purpose and direction.
- To facilitate students' engagement with university life.
- To promote and enhance learning.

The underlying rationale is that academic orientation should be integrated into subjects, not as an add-on or something that is peripheral.

In general, there is perhaps a greater emphasis on developmental approaches to the student experience than there was previously, in addition to the compensatory and foundational approaches identified in the previous survey. Nevertheless, a broad range of support and assistance that could be regarded as 'remedial' remains an important part of services offered by most institutions. In the following sections, we explore some of the reported new initiatives in greater detail.

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## 6.2 New initiatives, new emphases

### 6.2.1 Orientation

Most institutions have reviewed their orientation activities and there is a greater awareness of the importance of academic orientation as a key element of these activities, in addition to the wide range of social activities that have always been a focus of the orientation period. The change is reflected in one institution by the appointment of an academic staff member to head up orientation planning and

activities. In some institutions, there are well-structured ‘welcome’ programmes that use later year students as hosts. In addition, faculties and departments appear to be taking a greater role in orientation activities, again with an emphasis on academic orientation as well as social.

### **6.2.2 Mentoring and peer support**

Mentoring programmes are widely accepted as an important means of support for all students but especially for students experiencing problems. Such programmes come in a range of forms.

### **6.2.3 Monitoring of student progress**

There is greater recognition that earlier and more effective monitoring of student progress benefits both students and the institution. Initiatives across various institutions include:

- better training for staff to identify areas where students are having problems;
- assessment tasks introduced early into a course;
- a First Year Network of Staff (a list of people from all areas who are alert to student problems and issues and who are proactive in referring students to an appropriate person); and
- review of ‘Show Cause’ procedures and practices in an attempt to ensure that they operate equitably and effectively to assist students and are not being used inappropriately;
- first year advisers in all faculties working with the university’s counselling service.

### **6.2.4 Choice and flexibility in the curriculum**

In general, universities are moving towards greater choice and flexibility in curriculum with the aim of more adequately catering for a diverse student population. Some institutions have gone further than others, making flexibility and choice cornerstones of their planning.

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## **6.3 New planning bodies**

We asked informants whether any new planning or advisory bodies had been set up specifically to address first year issues. Only a minority reported that their institution had established a body or committee aimed at first year. Most institutions reported that first year issues were addressed by a working party or education committee that included first year planning in a broader framework or agenda.

An example of the former was the institution that has had a Transition Programme that works across faculties since 1998. The aims of the Programme are to set

support structures for transition in place; to work with faculties to identify student needs in different faculties and to initiate ongoing support structures in the faculties. An example of a broader approach is the Working Party in one institution created as a consequence of the strategic planning process. The Working Party focus is to facilitate a more even process across the university and to monitor faculty performance. The framework is developmental, looking at first year as an important part of the total student experience.

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## 6.4 Responsibility and accountability

All of the participating institutions emphasised devolution of accountability and responsibility, but there was a recognition that some initiatives need to be centrally driven.

Overall, there is an emphasis on collaboration between faculties, central student support service units, and university administrations in providing teaching and learning support for students. Partnerships is the key word. Faculties are increasingly being expected to play a larger part in providing academic and social orientation, ongoing support and specific programmes for first year students. Most institutions are trying in various ways to build in faculty responsibility—through the setting up of faculty plans and faculty reporting procedures, for example.

There is a general perception that developments across faculties are often quite uneven and where faculties have well-developed programmes, it is sometimes due to particular staff having a specific interest in the area. How to best promote a more even development across faculties is an important issue in most institutions.

The integration of central support services and faculty initiatives is also a matter of debate for most institutions. Some support units and learning units emphasise work with faculties and with identified students; others attempt to provide assistance to all students. Some faculties have developed strong and effective partnerships with the central services. In one institution, the aim is to have learning skills units as part of the core requirements for subjects. This has already occurred in one faculty, and the arrangements are likely to be extended.

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## 6.5 Evaluation and monitoring

Evaluation and monitoring of first year support initiatives are somewhat uneven. It is not possible to generalise across the range of initiatives, some of which are faculty and department specific and others of which are university wide. General student progress and attrition are monitored in all institutions. A number have developed or are further refining, regular and ongoing student surveys. Some institutions report specifically on the progress of first year students and have a well-developed auditing process. Faculty and department based programmes, for example mentoring and peer support programmes, are often evaluated, with varying degrees of rigour.

Staff from at least one university that is putting an institution-wide framework into place argued that there were difficulties in establishing an adequate evaluation

framework when the aim was institutional change that will only be observable after some years.

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## 6.6 Most effective approaches

We asked respondents to describe, in their opinion, the most effective initiative relating to first year students introduced by their university in the past few years. We do not suggest that our informants were in a position to be fully familiar with the whole range of initiatives across the university or that responses to this question are necessarily a true indication of effectiveness. Nevertheless, they indicate the range of initiatives, from broad policy directions to specific strategies, that are regarded positively.

- The introduction into a core subject of a piece of assessed writing within the first couple of weeks of semester has greatly assisted early support for students experiencing difficulties. Lecturers may then refer students; tutors are made aware of the problem and are thus oriented to help. This replaces a system where students could reach week ten of the semester before they had to submit a written piece of work.
- Peer support programmes, where outstanding students teach first year students who are having problems. The special value of such programmes is the use of young people whose experience is close to that of the students they are tutoring. Tutors are closely trained by the university's learning centre.
- A student-to-student mentoring programme facilitated by staff has been very successful in one university. Common elements of the system are to be embedded in the faculty.
- Introduction of a personalised access and study policy, part of which focuses on learning needs at the point of a student's entry to the institution.
- The creation of an academic skills office that works closely with faculties and whose overall aim is to have study skills incorporated as core elements into faculty programmes.
- A review of orientation procedures for students led to changes such as greater faculty involvement, welcoming ceremonies for families, introductory lectures, 'Facts of Life' seminars on administrative matters, and the introduction of on-line enrolment.
- The establishment of a specific Transition Programme to work with faculties. One of the strengths of the Programme is thought to be the use of targeted programmes for faculties, a strategy that acknowledges different requirements and approaches for students in different faculties.
- A well-structured host scheme for commencing students, whereby they are introduced to the campus and its facilities by trained and paid later year students.

Much of the effort towards improving students' experience at first year has been motivated, at least in part, by concerns about high attrition rates. The institutions we consulted generally report that these efforts are enhancing the overall

experiences of first year students as a group. However, the extent to which attrition is being reduced is less clear and there is some acknowledgment that for a variety of individual and institutional reasons, a proportion of students are still not retained.

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## 6.7 The institutions

We have included brief summaries of initiatives reported by the institutions in order to highlight the range of approaches being used. Again, the emphasis is on broad trends and developments. We are aware of many specific programmes and initiatives by individual staff members that are being supported at a broader institutional level to varying degrees; however they are not included in the following brief outlines.

### 6.7.1 Established University

In 1998, the University appointed a designated person, the Transition Project Officer, to focus on transition issues within the University initiated as part of a broader student support plan. The primary focus is on students who are making the transition from secondary school to university; however, various groups of students, including mature aged students, are recognised as having particular needs.

The project has a particular aim to provide students with a university experience that encourages independence in a supportive environment. It is supported by sub-committees from particular stakeholders including students, school principals, and academics and is linked to teaching and learning quality assurance procedures. Considerable efforts have been put into working with faculties to develop appropriate strategies; strengthening information and support assistance during orientation; and the development of a range of mentoring programmes. The project has highlighted some issues of how best to integrate a focus on 'transition' issues with general teaching and learning issues taken on by faculties.

### 6.7.2 Suburban University

Suburban University has opted for a structured and separate emphasis on first year students. The Plan for First Year Academic Orientation project was developed in response to a request in 1995 by the Vice Chancellor to investigate and to address student withdrawal and attrition at the University. It focuses on the learning environment for all first year students.

The Academic Development Unit plays a key role in working with faculties on matters of student orientation. The Plan is described as non-prescriptive and faculties are encouraged to develop specific goals around the structured elements of the Plan. In 1998, an academic was placed in charge of the orientation programme which was previously coordinated by the Student Union. There are reports of greater awareness of first year issues amongst course coordinators and at faculty level, although the development and interest is somewhat uneven. Staff and student response to the Plan is being monitored.

### 6.7.3 New University

Support for first year students at New University is part of a series of broader university-wide initiatives. The University has introduced a personalised access and study policy to customise entry and teaching/learning to improve students' experiences, including retention and progression. Several groups were established to implement aspects of the personalised access and study policy, including a student support services development team whose task it was to develop policy specifically around first year issues.

The most important initiative, which will have a long-term impact on the first year experience, is the university's amalgamation with the TAFE institute that serves a similar area to the university. The university is strongly committed to 'seamless' study programmes for students and part of this approach is the development of hybrid or mixed sector programmes which combine higher education subjects and TAFE modules to suit students' interests and the university's assessment of their likelihood of success. This is expected to give students (a) a greater range of programmes (b) greater flexibility in constructing their programmes and (c) programmes that are a better match of their interests and abilities, thus resulting in better outcomes.

Faculties, schools and central services play a significant part in implementing aspects of the personalised access and study policy. Particular efforts have been put into developing student mentoring programmes in some faculties. Enhanced student support mechanisms have also included attention to simplifying administrative procedures.

### 6.7.4 International University

International University is taking a developmental rather than a remedial approach to first year issues. A Working Party of the Committee on Education has been created to examine specific first year issues, as a result of strategic planning processes. It plans to build on the central support mechanisms and faculty mechanisms for support that already exist.

A particular objective is to look at a more pro-active focus for identifying at risk students, early in the year if possible, but with a continuing eye to individual student progress and potential difficulties. There is a proposal to introduce a new integrated system for monitoring student progress and performance.

A network of first year advisers meets regularly. However, as in other institutions, commitment across faculties tends to be uneven. In some cases, central support services have close partnerships with faculties to develop, for example, peer support training. Both a central push and faculty devolution are seen as necessary for any significant changes to be made.

### 6.7.5 Regional University

Regional University's approach to first year students is a broadly based one under the aegis of the Academic Skills Office, part of the university's Teaching and Learning Centre. It started in a small way several years ago, focusing initially on assistance to students entering the university through their alternate entry

procedures. Since then it has gradually grown and been extended. There was a significant expansion in 1998, with development of programmes in conjunction with the faculties. The focus turned to students assessed as at risk by faculty staff because they lacked certain skills. More recently, there have been moves towards all students having access to this type of assistance.

The initiative has a number of elements:

- an academic skills programme for students, organised in conjunction with the faculties;
- a programme of academic staff development;
- a programme of faculty mentoring, whereby a tutor with knowledge of learning skills, as well as discipline-based knowledge is available to staff in each faculty. The tutors are employed part-time in the faculties and are part of the Academic Skills Office; and
- a tutorial system that operates in the residential colleges; the programme has a long history but is increasingly integrating with the academic skills programme.

Academic skills programmes are also incorporated into the on-campus component of distant education study. The aim is for faculties to make learning skills a core element of courses. At the time of the consultation, this was the case in one subject only, where students have to attend a certain number of courses as part of their studies. However, there were moves to introduce the system into other faculties.

In general, first year students at Regional University have a high level of support as most are on campus and many are in residential colleges and thus have access to the tutorial support programme. In colleges, first years have academic mentors. The Academic Skills Office works with them to help identify student needs, and they can then book in for appropriate courses. Some are general; some are discipline specific and closely aligned with the curriculum.

Management Information and Planning Services have an overall monitoring role, monitoring pass rates and student progress in first year. In 1999, the evaluation agenda was reorganised in order that a suite of questionnaires could be employed in an ongoing way so that longitudinal studies can take place. Student retention and progression have been actively monitored for the past 5–6 years.

### **6.7.6 Applied University**

Applied University has not developed any new policies specifically for first year students; however, there has been considerable emphasis on overall learning support within the university, spearheaded by a Working Party on teaching and learning support. The overall aim is a partnership between faculties, divisions and the Division of Information and Academic Services towards embedding appropriate learning support in all undergraduate units. Part of the role of the Working Party is to put together a matrix of all learning and teaching support services.

A Student Focus Project in 1996 identified significant student support issues. In addressing these, the University believes it has achieved the following outcomes:

- Enrolment is now more student centred and friendly.

- Orientation to the university is now far better coordinated, with various support units and the library working together.
- Tutorial allocation is easier with students able to do it themselves on-line.
- The timetable is on-line and better managed.

Although the changes apply to all students, they are particularly relevant to first years.

The review of orientation for students has led to the faculties having a greater role. Student feedback on changes so far instituted has been positive. A formal evaluation has also been conducted.

Other initiatives include strategies aimed at the development of generic skills, and on-line student portfolios (for future employment). It is planned that a portfolio would make clear how generic skills relate to a career. The university is concerned with developing non-academic skills as well as academic. The on-line portfolio would allow students to develop a qualitative record of achievements and the generic skills they have developed. Students could do a skills audit before they begin study. The portfolio would also include activities external to the university.

### **6.7.7 Consolidated University**

Overall, the university is aiming to improve the experience of students at all levels. Support for first year students is part of several wider initiatives and organising concepts. Important frameworks are Graduate Qualities and student-centred learning. The Graduate Qualities framework is aimed at reforming curriculum and teaching.

Seven qualities have been identified and student support is tailored towards facilitating the qualities. There are defined levels of progression and means of supporting them. A profile is developed over the length of a course. This is all embedded in a curriculum framework.

A range of initiatives has coalesced or been gathered together within the overarching graduate qualities framework. They include initiatives as a result of concerns about first year students, a review of non-traditional means of entry to the university and support for students who do so, and a response to internationalising the curriculum.

The aim is to embed the facilitation of graduate quality into the mainstream curriculum framework, with connections between the curriculum and graduate quality spelt out at every level. It is supported by a well-developed professional development programme for staff, targeted at high enrolment subjects.

The Teaching and Learning Committee, a sub-committee of the Academic Board, oversees the graduate qualities framework and progress towards their development.

The Student Services Advisory Group has a special responsibility for first year issues. There is a diverse range of first year initiatives at course and faculty level.

They include:

- intensive oral language support in one faculty where courses lead to employment in a profession.

- an emphasis on Information Literacy (including computer literacy) delivered partly at the time of orientation for commencing students.
- regular curriculum development exercises in one faculty that have had a significant effect on pass rates in the core subjects.

The most significant development over recent years has been the attempt to use the Graduate Qualities framework to define desired teaching and learning outcomes. It is recognised that the changes being aimed for will take time.

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## 7. Conclusions

The results reported in this study provide the basis for reflecting on developments and initiatives over the last five years aimed at improving the first year experience in Australian higher education. The data now provide an exceptionally strong basis for monitoring major changes in the student experience in the future. For the first time we have baseline data on the impact of new approaches to teaching and learning on the student experience, and on the changing nature of the relationship between students and universities.

The data show a strong pattern of stability in many of the aspects that contribute to student adjustment in the process of transition. The reasons students have for enrolling have remained quite constant over the last five years. The overwhelming majority still balance the desire to study in a field that interests them and the desire to improve their job prospects. Likewise, there has been no change in the sense of purpose of first year students, who, on the whole, know why they want to come to university and what they want to get from the experience.

Despite what we believe to be widespread and concerted efforts to improve the links between school and university, a third of the students who have come direct from school still do not feel they were ready to choose a course, and two thirds still believe they were not well-prepared for university study. Other noteworthy results were the increase in the proportion of students who withdrew from at least one subject in 1999, and the stability of the number who seriously considered deferring.

We would not want to suggest that these problems are intractable, but from this and other work we are convinced that considerably more needs to be done to help students make the best possible course choices in the first place, and there should be opportunities to change courses with minimum penalties. Likewise, while the results indicate that a certain and substantial proportion of students will always have problems in adjusting to university, there is some evidence to suggest that institutional policy and practice may have a positive impact. We noted, for example, that there has been a decline in the proportion of students in some universities who find their studies more demanding than school, yet, on the other hand, in all but two institutions more students now find their study more fulfilling than at school. Clearly these shifts are important and can most likely be attributed to institutional policy decisions concerning, for example, student selection, the introduction of support programmes, and changes in curriculum design and approaches to teaching.

It was not the purpose of this project to focus on specific institutional differences but these notable results suggest that universities would benefit from monitoring the impact of such policies on student perceptions of the demands of courses and the relative sense of fulfilment students get from learning at university in the initial phase of their undergraduate experience. We have argued previously that for many students the patterns of learning and the likelihood of persistence and achievement are firmly established in the first few months of the university experience.

The contrasts in expectations and realities described in Chapter 3 show a remarkable consistency with 1994 results on many aspects of integration and enrolment. However, the increase in the proportion of students who are finding it difficult to motivate themselves is clearly an important trend. We see this, combined with the major increase in the proportion of students working part-time, as some support for our view in 1994 that a growing number of students are becoming increasingly disengaged from the university experience and expecting it to fit with their lives rather than vice-versa.

Indeed, the issue of the working student is a major shift that requires attention at both national and institutional levels. This confirms what most academics already know well—a major increase in the number of students working long hours in paid employment when they are enrolled full-time. This phenomenon of *de facto* part-time study is of course not exclusive to first year students but it is a serious issue for them, especially when, as the evidence suggests, the patterns of persistence and drop-out are established so strongly in the first year. It is also a serious issue for universities since it necessarily points to the possibility of everyday compromises in academic demands and standards of work required.

These trends relate to the increased provision and use of new modes of delivery for on-campus students. We have identified the patterns of use of new technologies as well as alternative approaches to teaching and learning. On the whole, only a minority of students expected to receive much in the way of new technologies and a range of approaches to learning. In fact, a substantially larger proportion get more. In some instances, universities were providing considerably more than students expected.

The review of institutional initiatives shows some major and concerted efforts to address the many issues raised in the 1994 report. We should point out that there has been an enormous amount of activity conducted along similar lines in most other universities in Australia which is being widely reported in national and international conferences. Many universities have now conducted their own research and are monitoring the experiences of first year students closely.

While there remains a considerable amount of diversity across the universities and across the students sampled, it is still the case that some fundamental problems in transition and the first year experience remain. A large proportion of students—around one-third—have made poor choices of courses and are reluctant participants even after six months or so at university. They are still, on the whole, not very satisfied with specific aspects of teaching, particularly the availability of staff and the feedback they get on their progress. On the positive side, however, we see some areas of improvement and the suggestion of some positive developments from five years of institutional initiatives.

A clear majority—at least two thirds of respondents—are finding their courses stimulating, the quality of teaching generally good, and the course overall satisfying. And even more positive is the high level of interest in the first year experience, and commitment to improvement, across the Australian higher education system.

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## Appendix:

# Survey method and data analysis

In June 1999, letters were sent to the Vice Chancellors of the seven Australian universities that had participated in the 1994 First Year Experience survey, seeking their cooperation for the 1999 survey. All agreed to the request.

The procedure for selecting a representative sample of first years from each of the seven universities was basically the same as that followed in 1994. The parameters of the sample were internal, first year, first time students at bachelor and 'other undergraduate' level, stratified by the main DETYA fields of study. We sent each institution relatively detailed suggestions as to how they might proceed in selecting a sample; however, we were not overly prescriptive, recognising that institutions might have their own procedures for generating such a sample. In 1994, we sought a 20 per cent sample from the population of first year students. In 1999, given the declining response rates to mailed surveys, we asked for a 25 per cent sample in order to ensure a sample of reasonable size. Where the sample selected for a field of study was less than 50 students, institutions were asked to increase the sample to 50, and if total enrolments for the field of study were less than 50, to include all first years within scope in that field.

Because of the relatively small numbers of first time, first year students at Regional University, we decided upon a 50 per cent sample from this institution. This ensured that we had a reasonable number of students from each university, as in addition to investigating overall trends, an important element of the study was an undertaking to provide the participating universities with findings from their own student body.

Institutions were given the choice of mailing out the surveys themselves or providing us with an electronic list of the sample to be mailed out by a Melbourne-based mailing-house. All but one institution chose the latter procedure. The initial mailout of surveys went to 7305 students. Three to four weeks later, a second mailout went to students who had not responded to that date.

A proportion of surveys (3.4 per cent) were not able to be used for various reasons. They included returns from students not enrolled in first year; students advising us that they were not enrolled in first year; parents advising us that sons and daughters were overseas; surveys unable to be delivered to the addressee; and returns received after the cut-off date for data entry. It is not unexpected that a proportion of surveys could not be delivered, as it is difficult for universities to maintain a completely accurate and up to date list of student addresses. Overall, the potential number of 'useable' surveys, excluding those discarded for all reasons, was 7077. This number was used to calculate the overall return rate, which was 36.8 per cent.

Response rates varied across the institutions, from a low of 23 per cent at International University to a high of 44 per cent at Applied University. The response rate at International University was considerably lower than the average and we now understand that an institutional survey was in progress.

**Table A.1** Response rates by institution

	Useable returns	No. mailed	Effective response rate (%)
Established	511	1261	42
Suburban	454	1211	39
New	357	1167	32
International	245	1129	23
Regional	173	411	43
Applied	437	1028	44
Consolidated	432	1098	40
Total	2609	7305*	37

\*Useable total 7077

## Survey respondents compared with 1999 undergraduate commencers

We asked each institution to provide us with some basic characteristics of the population from which their samples were drawn; again, institutions were asked about the population of first time first years. Several institutions were not readily able to provide data for the time period when the samples were drawn. Considering a relatively constant flow of withdrawals, deferments and other changes to enrolments, the actual population varies throughout the year.

Table A.2 gives details of gender breakdown, the percentage of younger students and the percentage of part-time first years in both the 1994 and 1999 samples compared with the populations of each institution.

Female respondents from all institutions are over-represented in our sample, most obviously so in the samples from Suburban and New Universities. We have a higher percentage of students aged 19 years and younger compared with the institutional populations of first years, except from International and Applied Universities. Our sample includes somewhat fewer part-timers than the actual first year populations of the institutions, especially from International and Consolidated Universities.

**Table A.2 Selected characteristics of survey respondents compared with data for first time first years reported by institutions, 1994 and 1999 samples (%)**

	Females				19 years and under				Part-time			
	Sample		Institution		Sample		Institution		Sample		Institution	
	1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999
Established#* 555	62	60	56	56	86	92	84	85	2	3	4	6
Suburban	68	71	64	64	74	74	51	61	8	7	27	10
New+	66	67	N/A	53	70	64	N/A	43	8	9	N/A	17
International	60	56	47	52	77	60	51	71	4	4	11	17
Regional <sup>^</sup>	66	72	58	65	64	88	35	86	2	1	48	2
Applied	61	62	56	58	66	76	53	80	9	5	25	7
Consolidated	61	65	57	61	43	75	44	67	27	8	22	22

The figures in this table were, in both 1994 and 1999, provided by the institutions as figures for first-time first year commencers by these characteristics are not available from DETYA statistics. Some of the differences between 1994 and 1999 may be accounted for by the stricter sampling directions to institutions regarding 'first timers' in 1999. 'First-timers' are more likely to be fulltime younger students.

Notes re 1994 figures: (from McInnis and James 1995, p. 140)

The study was of first time first year commencers. Available statistics tend not to distinguish first time undergraduate commencers and include students who attended university previously and were commencing a new course of study. Unless otherwise indicated, data pertains to undergraduate commencers.

#Established University provided their most reliable estimate of data pertaining to first time undergraduate commencers (except in the age category where these data were unavailable).

<sup>^</sup>Regional University also provided data on first time commencers. However, these data also include external students (only internal students were surveyed).

Notes on 1999 figures:

\*Figures as at March 31, 1999.

+Figures as at November 1999 except for age data which is at August 1999.

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