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## **The Transition Experience of Australian Students to University: The Importance of Social Support.**

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*The transition to university for many university students has the potential to be stressful requiring the student to make significant adjustments to their personal, social and academic lives. Research identifies the importance of social support in easing the transition for these students however much of this research has implied the role of social support through their use of social support scales rather than from understanding the transition experience from the students themselves. In addition few studies understand the experience of transition in the Australian tertiary sector. The present study sought to redress this by interviewing Australian students about their experience as a new first year university student. Five themes emerged from qualitative interviews (social support, expectation, time management, transition issues and emotions) indicating they are important contributors in enabling these participants to successfully adjust to university study and life. A number of avenues exist for programs to support first year students and future research in this area.*

It is often remarked that the only constant in today's world is change, therefore change is a common occurrence for everyone throughout life. One avenue for understanding change and how change impacts is through transition. Transition refers to "periods of change, disequilibrium and internal conflict about gains and losses that occur between periods of stability, balance, and relative quiescence" (Cowan, 1991, p.7). Individuals may experience a number of major transitions during their lifetime such as change of school, career change, or geographic relocation. During such a transition an individual is forced to take an unfamiliar path. This road of unfamiliarity can place the individual in a state of heightened vulnerability as he/she attempts to negotiate the demands of the transition and regain some sense of stability in the new environment (Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986).

Given the high levels of stress an individual is faced with when going through a transition, and the immense pressure that is placed on their coping resources, one may anticipate that support from family and friends during this period would be invaluable (Moyle & Parkes, 1999). The type of support found to be beneficial during transition is social support. Social support is defined as "perceived

instrumental or expressive provisions supplied to an individual by confiding partners, social networks, and the greater community" (Jay & D'Augelli, 1991, p.96).

An aspect of social support that has received much attention over the past 20 years is the role that social support plays during life transitions, particularly the transition of late adolescence from high school to university (e.g., Jay & D'Augelli, 1991; Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000; Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995). This transition period presents an ideal situation to study the importance of social support on the transitional experience, as these students navigate their way through a number of challenges ranging from changes to their social networks to adjusting their daily routine (Tao et al., 2000).

A critical element of transition is the need it presents for change, hence a central task for students to undertake when making the transition from high school to university is adjusting to their new environment. Specifically it is suggested that there are three important areas of adjustment for students commencing tertiary studies and they include academic, social, and personal/emotional adjustment (Schwitzer, Griffen, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). Evidence from the research

literature (e.g., Tao et al., 2000) suggests social support plays a fundamental role in aiding adjustment to university. In terms of significant contributors of social support, faculty members, peers, and family members are all potential sources of support for students (Weir & Okun, 1989).

In examining the relationship between social support and university adjustment Zea et al. (1995) conducted a study with first year university students ( $n=203$ ) from a Northeast American university. The participants were required to complete several quantitative scales relating to social support, adjustment, and psychosocial competency. The results indicated that socially supported students produced the most desirable outcomes in the areas of academic, social, and emotional adjustment. In addition, the findings suggested that lacking a supportive social network could severely hinder ones adjustment to university. These findings provide confirmation to the belief that social support aids students to successfully adjust to university.

More recently a study by Pratt, Bowers, Terzian, & Hunsberger (2000) examined the effectiveness of implementing a social support program for first year students into the university setting. The recruited participants ( $n=110$ ), from a small Canadian university, were required to complete various questionnaires, pre and post intervention. The participants were divided into two groups, a control group ( $n=50$ ) and an experimental group ( $n=60$ ). The experimental group was further divided into six groups and each group engaged in nine group discussion sessions over the course of first semester. The control group was not required to take part in the intervention and simply had to fill out the questionnaires at the same time intervals as the participants from the experimental group.

These results provide significant support for social support in aiding university adjustment as students involved in the experimental group scored higher on tests of university adjustment than those students in the control group. Furthermore, it was revealed that students involved in the intervention were less likely to report depressive symptoms, and were less inclined to skip class when compared with students in the control group (Pratt et al., 2000).

These findings are consistent with findings from other research (e.g., Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Lamothe et al., 1995) which suggests that social support is a major mechanism in the successful adjustment of first year students to university.

Another element that plays a prominent role in university adjustment and is partially related to social support is expectations. Student expectations about university prior to entering the educational institution are reported to impact on their ability to adjust to university as such expectations influence ones feelings and perceptions about university and subsequently influence ones response to such expectations. Students who have expectations that are positive and representative of reality tend to experience sound adjustment to university as compared to students with particularly negative expectations or who experience discrepancies between expectations and reality (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000).

Research by Jackson et al. (2000) attempted to provide insight into the relationship between student expectations and university adjustment. The study took place at a Canadian university and included 107 first year university students. The participants completed eight questionnaires on five separate occasions over the course of their four years of study at the university. The results revealed that student expectations about university played a critical role in their adjustment to university. Students who possessed positive academic and adaptation expectations tended to adjust most successfully to university. Conversely, students with fearful expectations were more inclined to adjust poorly to university. Explanations for these findings originate from the belief that students with positive expectations were more inclined to anticipate challenges they may encounter when making the transition to university and hence were well equipped when experiencing the reality of university. Similar findings have been generated by earlier research (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992) which provides further validation for the importance of student expectations in university adjustment.

Justification for much emphasis being placed on the importance of successful university adjustment stems from the crucial role this process plays in the academic persistence of

students. In an attempt to ascertain which of the three areas of adjustment is the best at predicting academic persistence, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) studied a group of first year university students. A total of 208 participants were recruited from a large Northwest American university, and were asked to complete two self-report questionnaires regarding university adjustment. Six years following the completion of the questionnaires, each student's transcript was examined and their graduation status determined. The results from the study indicated that personal/emotional, social, and academic adjustment were all equally important in predicting academic persistence in students. These findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1992; Schwitzer et al., 1999) which suggests the completion of a university degree is a complex achievement whereby no single predictor is successful in determining academic persistence.

The crucial role of social support in successful university adjustment and academic persistence has been well established however the manner in which social support contributes to these positive outcomes has yet to be explored. Two competing theories exist in the research literature, the buffering model and the main/direct effect model, both of which attempt to explain how social support operates. The buffering model argues that a positive relationship exists between support and well-being. Where an individual is under stress the support they receive from friends and family serves as a buffer from the potentially negative effects of the stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The main direct/effect model suggests social support is beneficial regardless of whether the individual is experiencing stress or not. This model postulates that individuals in socially supportive networks have regular positive experiences and are provided with stability, predictability, as well as a sense of self worth. These positive outcomes of social interaction then impact on the person's overall well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

In an attempt to determine which of the two models was more plausible, Cohen and Wills (1985) reviewed a large number of studies and concluded evidence exists to support both models. This suggests neither model is superior

in explaining the process of social support and Cohen and Wills argue that the manner in which the two models conceptualized social support is reflected by the two different processes through which social support impacted on well-being.

The positive outcomes of social support in the transition and adjustment to university have been well documented. It is important to note however that students experience additional benefits when they experience social support. Social support has been positively correlated with mental and physical health, positive coping, and optimism (Jou & Fukada, 2002; Zea et al., 1995; Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002). For example, Halamandaris and Power (1997) focused their research on social support and the psychosocial adjustment of first year university students. Participants in this study included 129 British students, all of who were required to fill out several quantitative questionnaires on personality, social support, and psychosocial adjustment to university. The results indicated that students who lacked social support tended to be lonely, introverted, anxious, and scored lower on tests of mental and somatic well-being when compared with students who were socially supported. These findings were replicated in more recent studies by Jou and Fukada (2000) as well as Furukawa, Sarason, and Sarason (1998) which suggests social support is correlated with positive mental and physical health outcomes.

Social support also encourages students to adopt positive coping strategies. Positive coping strategies are characterized by problem-focused efforts and an approach-oriented style which are seen as positive predictors of university adjustment and result in fewer emotional and behavioural disorders (Tao et al., 2000). For example, research by Tao et al. (2000) demonstrated that social support was positively related to student's adopting positive coping strategies. This was revealed when 390 Chinese university students completed several quantitative scales relating to social support, coping strategies, and university adjustment. The results indicated that students who reported high levels of social support were more inclined to engage in positive coping as opposed to negative coping. Further research by Shields (2001) generated similar findings when it was revealed that students who persisted with their academic

studies were more inclined to use positive coping strategies and actively seek out social support as compared to students who lacked such support.

Closely related to the issue of positive coping is optimism. Individuals with an optimistic outlook are more effective at coping with stressful events than pessimistic individuals. Optimists tend to possess high levels of social support suggesting that social support may encourage people to become more optimistic (Brissette et al., 2002). In a study by Brissette et al. (2002) the relationship between social support and optimism was explored. The study focused on students going through the transition from high school to university and included 89 American students. The participants were asked to complete seven scales that focused on various issues such as social support, stress, and optimism. The results from the study revealed that students with an optimistic outlook experienced more social support than students categorized as pessimists. Furthermore, optimistic students were less stressed, scored lower on tests of depression, and engaged in positive coping. This suggests that social support is positively related to optimism, mental health, and positive coping.

Despite the amount of research that has been generated by the issues of social support, university adjustment, and academic persistence few studies have used a qualitative approach which enables a more detailed understanding of the issues surrounding social support from the perspective of the students' themselves. Further to this changes to higher education in the Australian tertiary sector has led to a doubling of the amount of people seeking tertiary entrance (50% of first years are less than 19 years of age) and has put a strain on universities systems as many students are under prepared for the tertiary education experience (NICHE, 1997). As a result attrition rates have increased and are highest in the first year of university attendance (Chang, Cohen, Pike, Pooley, & Breen, 2003). With these contextual factors in mind the present study attempts to examine the importance of social support to the transitional experience of first year Australian university students.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

All participants were first year university students at an Australian university. As suggested by Moutsakas (1990) a total of 12 participants were recruited to participate in the present study. The participants (10 females and two males) were either full-time or part-time students ranging in age from 17 to 45 years.

Once involved in the study participants took part in an interview where they were asked to describe their experience of starting university and what adjustments they have had to make in terms of the academic environment and the social environment. They were also asked about the expectations of the course of study they had chosen and any positive and negative aspects, emotions or experiences they had had.

### *Data Analysis*

Each interview was recorded and transcribed and then analyzed using the constant comparative method as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). The constant comparative method involves a combination of inductive category coding with a comparison of all the obtained units of meaning. When new units of meaning are discovered, they are compared with all the other units of meaning and then categorized with the similar units of meaning. A new category is formed if there are no similar units of meaning (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The process of analysis began with inductive category coding. This involved examining all the transcripts for recurring concepts and themes. Each concept or theme formed a provisional category. Any data that then fitted in a provisional category was placed in the respective category. If data did not fit any of the provisional categories, a new category was formed and named. This process continued until all identified concepts and themes were placed in a category (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The next step in the analysis involved examination. Each provisional category was examined and propositional statements were then made for each of the categories. A propositional statement indicates the meaning that is contained in the data gathered, together,

Table 1  
*Themes Relating to Transition and University Adjustment*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Label</b>
<b>Theme 1</b>	<b>Social Support</b>
Sub Theme A	Academic adjustment
Sub Theme B	Social adjustment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing friendships</li> <li>• Peer mentors</li> <li>• Sources of support</li> <li>• Elements of supportive friendships</li> <li>• University friendships</li> <li>• Mature age students and socializing</li> </ul>
Sub Theme C	Academic persistence
Sub Theme D	Optimism and positive coping
<b>Theme 2</b>	<b>Expectations</b>
Sub Theme A	Realistic expectations
Sub Theme B	School leaver students and social expectations
<b>Theme 3</b>	<b>Transitional Issues</b>
Sub Theme A	Change daily routine
Sub Theme B	Financial adjustment
Sub Theme C	New learning environment
Sub Theme D	Adjusting to academic workload
<b>Theme 4</b>	<b>Time Management</b>
<b>Theme 5</b>	<b>Emotions</b>
Sub Theme A	School leaver student emotions
Sub Theme B	Mature age student emotions

under a category name. The data contained in each category was then reread to ensure it fitted its designated category. If the data did not fit the given category, they were categorized elsewhere (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The subsequent step in the data analysis involved careful examination of the propositional statements. The goal here was to identify the propositions that stand alone and those which are connected. The combination of two or more propositions is referred to as an outcome proposition. This process continued with similar categories combining to result in fewer and more meaningful categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). At the completion of this process a peer reviewed the final categories to check for meaning. There was general agreeance on the labeled categories and the data contained under each category. This process of member checking is particularly important as it ensures the

credibility and dependability of the obtained data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

#### **Findings and Interpretations**

From the analysis five themes emerged, as follows, social support, expectations, transitional issues, time management, and emotions. To enhance ones understanding of the themes extracted from the research, a table is presented below that details the themes and sub themes produced by the data analysis.

Each theme was an important contributor in enabling participants to adjust successfully to university. Prior to presenting each theme it is necessary to acknowledge a crucial finding that emerged from this research. It was revealed that the participants could be divided into two distinct groups, school leaver students and mature age students. School leaver students are students who enter university straight from high school whereas mature age students are students who are

over the age of 20 the year they plan to study an undergraduate qualification at university. The themes presented in this research are pertinent to both groups of students however it will become evident that although all participants had similar experiences as first year university students, the nature of some of these experiences differed depending on the classification of the student.

#### *Social Support*

##### *Academic Adjustment*

The most prominent theme to evolve from the data is that of social support. Social support was consistently reported by the participants as being a critical factor in their successful adjustment to university, specifically in the areas of academic and social adjustment. An example of how social support aided academic adjustment was reported by one participant as follows:

*My sister's been here for two years so she gave me a lot of advice and stuff. She got me started. She explained how the library works, how to find journal articles, and stuff. She also looked over my assignments when I asked her to so I could make sure I was on the right track.*

Peer support also arose as being an important factor in academic adjustment. For example:

*A girlfriend of mine, her and I would get together – not so much in 'Intro to Psych.' but more in 'Research Methods'. There were actually a few of us that would get together in 'Research Methods'. That was really, really helpful... After 20 years stats. can be pretty daunting.*

In addition to family support and peer support, faculty support also emerged as a salient factor in aiding academic adjustment. For example:

*I really feel they (the lecturers) outline everything so well, and in the tutorials the tutors help out a lot with what's expected of us. In 'Introduction To Psychology' our tutor went through exactly how to write an essay so I didn't feel too bad about it.*

Furthermore, it appears that academic support services provided by the university are a practical and useful mechanism for enhancing

academic adjustment, particularly for mature age students. As one mature age participant noted:

*I did a uni prep. course... It was basically just like you learnt how to write essays, do research, and do all the kinds of things you need to do for an assignment. They taught you what plagiarism was and how to reference and all things like that... It definitely helped me prepare for the academic side of uni.*

##### *Social Adjustment*

Social support also played a critical role in participants' ability to adjust to the social environment within the university setting. As one mature age participant mentioned:

*There's two ladies who I've made friends with who are in a similar situation to myself, they're mature age and have families, and we have a good chat when we can. It's really good knowing other people who are in a similar situation to yourself because you're usually experiencing the same feelings and problems so we can talk to each other about this stuff.*

To reinforce the notion that social support is an important factor in social adjustment and hence overall adjustment to university, one mature age participant recalls why she withdrew from university 12 years earlier:

*I didn't fit in. I didn't find the experience as welcoming as I thought it would be...I found everyone was really clicky... I just found the whole social side of things unwelcoming and I didn't really integrate too well.*

An important finding to emerge from the data is the difficulty many participants, particularly school leaver participants, reported having in developing friendships due to the fact they did not have regular contact with the same people. As two school leaver participants noted:

*It's a bit harder (to make friends) than school because I'm used to seeing everyone, everyday, where here it's like once a week."*

*"It did take a little bit longer to make friends, mainly because we're not at uni all day, every day like high school.*

One mechanism adopted by the university that did help participants develop friendships within the university environment was peer mentors. All participants in this study were assigned to small groups and each group included a mentor, usually a second or third year psychology student, who was available to answer any questions students may have had about university. As two participants explained:

*The mentor...She was very nice. She explained university and showed us around which made it a bit easier because I didn't know where everything was, like the library and all that, so that was quite a useful thing to have."*

*"There was a tute where we had a mentor, I met some people and everything and there's a couple of people from that who I made friends with and we (text) message each other all the time.*

An interesting finding that was revealed in the analysis was the existence of two peer support groups. Participants consistently reported that they had two distinct sources of peer support, their university friends and their friends outside of university. Friends within the university setting were useful for dealing with issues regarding university and friends outside of university were helpful for dealing with other life issues. For example:

*If the situation arose where I felt stressed out I would probably call up one of my friends from high school and go out for coffee or chat, and if it was to do with uni I'd probably ask one of my uni mates about it.*

This finding raises an important issue and this concerns the key elements of a socially supportive relationship. It appears that similarity and understanding are important attributes in supportive friendships. As one participant said:

*We're there to help each other because we're all in the same boat, we're going through similar experiences so it's comforting being able to go through these experiences with someone who understands.*

In addition to the previous finding, it was revealed that university friendships only exist within the educational institution and do not

extend into the students personal lives. As one participant mentioned:

*I've already got my own friends who I go out and socialize with...I've made friends with people at uni but that's mainly just to do with uni, like assignments and stuff, not socially going out with them.*

An explanation for this may be due to the 'newness' of the university friendships as they are only in their early stages of development, however one may find that as the students progress through university these friendships will strengthen and as a result the relationship may be viewed differently.

In regards to social support and social adjustment, an additional noteworthy finding did emerge from the data. It was revealed that the mature age participants were overtly conscious not to create large social networks for themselves within the university environment. This finding is clearly indicated by one mature age participant:

*I've found that because I haven't studied for six years and it was my decision to go back to uni, I chose not to try make too many friends because I'm there to study not socialize. Even though I have peers that I can talk to and get advice from...I chose not to make too much of a social environment so I'm not wasting my time socializing.*

The reported findings indicate that social support is an important contributor to successful social adjustment and it appears that the combination of these two factors provides the student with comfort and reassurance within the university setting. For example, two participants mentioned:

*It's good knowing you have that support if you need it, it's reassuring. It's also good to walk into the lecture theatre or tutorial and know some familiar faces, it makes the whole uni experience more enjoyable.*

*Knowing that there is someone around who will listen to you if you needed it is good to know. And it's nice to walk into a lecture theatre and know some familiar faces, it makes you feel more at ease.*



The findings generated from this study exhibit remarkable similarity to findings from earlier research on social support and university adjustment. Research by Hinderlie and Kenny (2002), Pratt et al. (2000), and Zea et al. (1995) suggests social support is a salient factor in university adjustment as students who experienced support scored more highly on scales relating to university adjustment when compared with students lacking such support. The findings from this present study affirm the importance of social support in the transition to university.

#### *Academic Persistence*

In addition to playing a vital role in aiding adjustment to university, social support also contributed to students' decisions to persist with their academic studies. As noted by one participant:

*My brother's girlfriend. She's basically my strength I spose, without her I think I would have just given up cos I just feel that things I needed to know about doing assignments, and general stuff about uni and preparing for it, if I didn't have someone close to me helping me...I would've just said it's too hard and forgotten about it before I'd even given it a chance.*

This quote reinforces the importance of social support during the transition to university and also highlights how a lack of support could hinder adjustment and subsequently impact on a student's decision to persist with their academic studies. Past research in this area (e.g., Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1992) suggests social support is an important mechanism in encouraging academic persistence in tertiary students. These current findings provide favourable support for this notion.

#### *Optimism and Positive Coping*

Further to aiding university adjustment and encouraging academic persistence, social support was also revealed to foster optimism and positive coping in students. Participants who were well supported were more inclined to have optimistic outlooks and engage in positive coping. For example:

*Sometimes when I start an assignment there might be a bit of self doubt but I just know if I do it, it will be O.K. I try not to think too many negative*

*thoughts, like self doubt, I'm not like that. I'm much more of a positive person. I'm the kind of person that faces things head on, so if I'm feeling overwhelmed or stressed out I just deal with the situation then and there.*

These findings are congruent with findings from other research (e.g., Brissette et al., 2002; Shields, 2001; Tao et al., 2000) which have been successful in demonstrating that socially supported students have a tendency to be optimistic and engage in positive coping. These present findings provide further support to the belief that optimism and positive coping are positively linked with social support.

#### *Expectations*

##### *Realistic Expectations*

The second theme to emerge through the data was expectations. Most participants held relatively realistic expectations about university, this was made possible as many participants had family or friends who were completing, or who had completed, tertiary studies and such contacts provided the participant with information and advice on university. As two participants reported:

*Well I've got heaps of mates who went to uni so I've had plenty of feedback from them about what to expect.*

*My parents always said that uni was extremely hard and so I did think it would be pretty full on, which it was in a way with all the readings and research. It was O.K. though because I was prepared for it.*

Such realistic expectations may have also contributed to the successful adjustment of the participants to university. The research literature supports this notion by suggesting students who possess positive academic and adaptation expectancies in relation to university adjust well when making the transition to the educational institution. Students with such expectations are believed to anticipate potential challenges and acknowledge the importance of their role in the adjustment process, the combination of these positive elements enable students to make a sound adjustment to university (Jackson et al., 2000).

### *School Leaver Students and Social Expectations*

An intriguing finding to emerge from the data regarding expectations relates to a common expectation held by students classified as school leavers. Participants who were school leaver students consistently reported feeling disappointed about the fact the university lacked a vibrant social atmosphere. Such participants expected the university to offer more opportunities for socialization amongst the students. As one student expressed:

*I think that would be really good (to have social gatherings) because that makes you want to meet new people. That was another expectation I had about uni, I thought there would be like a faculty ball or parties where students can get together...an informal gathering outside of the uni environment would be really good and well received by first year students. I was expecting to have more of a social life from my uni friends but I haven't really seen them out of uni, so it's been different to what I expected.*

This finding is inconsistent with the research that has been conducted on expectations and adjustment (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Jackson et al., 2000) as such research asserts that when discrepancies arise in relation to one's expectations and reality, the individual is more inclined to experience difficulties in adjusting to their new environment. Despite such inconsistencies there is a plausible explanation for this finding. It is possible that the peer mentor program, which involved all participants, provided the students with a substitute means of social contact which meant the incompatibility of their expectations with reality actually had little impact on their ability to adjust to university.

### **Transitional Issues**

#### *Change Daily Routine*

The third theme that arose through the data was transitional issues. Participants regularly reported encountering a number of challenges when making the transition to university. Some of these challenges were

relevant to both school leaving participants and mature age participants, whereas some challenges were only applicable to one of the groups. A transitional issue that required adjustment for both groups of participants was changing ones daily routine. The following two quotes, the former by a school leaver participant and the latter by a mature age participant, highlight this issue:

*It was a little hard to get into the routine because it is so different from school...I felt weird cos you don't have to get up at 7 o'clock each morning to go to school and then come home at 3, and it's a little bit more interruptive. The hardest thing is probably after 6pm, that's when most people who are working start to switch off, but you have to keep going.*

#### *Financial Adjustment*

Another transitional issue that was reported by the mature age participants as an area that required some adjustment was the lack of money. The majority of the mature age participants worked as full-time employees prior to commencing university and evidently had to adjust to a lower income. One mature age participant clearly highlights this point:

*That was very difficult (going from full-time employment to full-time study), I found that because I had been working for six years full-time I found that I always had money back then and to suddenly go to minimal wages is very hard.*

#### *New Learning Environment*

A transitional issue that arose as being very prominent for school leaver participants was having to adjust to a new learning environment. Specifically, these participants reported difficulty in adjusting to being responsible for their own education. As two school leaver participants mentioned:

*The extreme of going from year 12 to uni, the difference is a lot. You have to motivate yourself and figure things out for yourself.*

*There's no actual time set, like no-one saying you should be studying for this or you should be doing that, there's just no set timetable and I think that's what takes the most adjusting.*

### *Adjusting to Academic Workload*

A final transitional issue that emerged as being challenging for both school leaver and mature age participants was the size of the workload the course required. All participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of work. For example:

*I just found the workload was quite overwhelming...there is so much to deal with, like loads of things to read, and the books are huge.*

*The thing that blew me away was the research. The whole research attached to psychology is something completely new to me, so when you're doing all the assignments you need to find all these things. It's so involved.*

These findings relating to transitional issues present an area that has remained relatively untouched in the research that focuses on social support and university adjustment. It does however demonstrate that students must make adjustments in all facets of their lives when making the transition to university and suggests how a failure to make such adjustments may potentially hinder the successful adjustment of the student to university. Further to this, these findings present an interesting point and this relates to the manner in which different types of students experience different challenges when entering tertiary studies. Clearly there are obstacles encountered by all entering students, however there are also challenges that are unique and applicable to only specific genres of students.

### *Time Management*

Time management presents the fourth theme that was revealed in the data. The participants consistently reported experiencing difficulty in trying to allocate sufficient time to all the demands in their lives. As three participants reported:

*Time management was a big concern... just trying to keep the house clean, go to uni, do the readings, go to work, making sure I was spending enough time with my daughter...Just trying to fit all that in took a bit of adjusting.*

*Time management I'm not very good at...I'm trying to juggle work,*

*boyfriend, family, friends, and study, and so I end up doing a lot of my assignments at the last minute...I'm not too good at time management.*

*I've always been a part-time student because I've always had to work full-time. It's difficult to balance the two, that's probably been the hardest thing...I'm just finding it difficult to find the time to study and get on campus to do the research I need to for assignments.*

Although this issue of time management affected all entering students, it was particularly prominent for the mature age participants. This is neither a surprising nor unique finding as mature age students typically experience severe time constraints as they must contend with responsibilities (e.g., child rearing) that are not commonly encountered by other students. Despite having so many additional pressures and demands, the mature age participants believe such added responsibilities provide them with skills that are advantageous to them. For example:

*I find being a mature age student...I know how to deal with stress and balance several things like uni work, part-time work, child and that. So I think in that sense a mature age student would have some advantages.*

These present findings are congruent with earlier research that has focused on the experiences of first year university students (e.g., McKenzie & Gow, 2004; Wong & Kwok, 1997) which has found mature age students experience extreme time constraints due to the multiple responsibilities and commitments in their lives. Due to such time pressures the mature age student must learn to manage their time effectively.

This issue of time management is a relatively new phenomenon that is affecting university students and this may be the result of the changing dynamics of university students. Present day living means many students balance full-time studies with part-time/casual employment which places immense restrictions on the student's time and consequently time management becomes a necessary skill to master. Perhaps as research progresses in this area

similar findings will be generated which may encourage universities to actively address this issue by providing students with information on how to effectively manage their time.

### *Emotions*

#### *School Leaver Student Emotions*

The final theme to emerge from the data is that of emotions. Participants reported experiencing two types of emotions in the lead up to commencing university, these emotions were labeled positive and negative emotions. A positive emotion that participants consistently reported experiencing was excitement. The most common negative emotion experienced by participants was nervousness. Justification for such feelings differed depending on whether the participant was a school leaver or mature age student. School leaver participants suggested their excitement was the result of starting a new chapter in their lives. The nervousness appeared to stem from the fact they knew no-one and concern about how they would integrate into the social environment. For example:

*Beforehand it was really exciting, I was really excited, couldn't wait to start.*

*I guess it (university) signified a new start, new beginnings.*

*I was pretty nervous because I didn't know anyone at all...and I was wondering how I was going to fit in.*

#### *Mature Age Student Emotions*

The mature age participants claim their excitement was due to the prospect of learning again. The nervousness that the mature age participants commonly reported feeling was the result of doubts they had surrounding their own academic ability. For example:

*Beforehand I was a bit nervous but excited as well...I was nervous thinking 'Oh gosh, I hope I'm gonna be able to handle the work and stuff' but excited as well cos I was kinda getting bored not learning anything.*

*Not knowing what I was capable of made me pretty nervous. I think I had put it off for so long for the fear of not being able to do it. Like I wasn't sure if I would be able to handle the workload, write essays, and stuff like that.*

This theme of emotions is certainly a noteworthy issue as how one feels emotionally about entering a new and unfamiliar environment would evidently impact on their ability to adjust to the new environment. Hence the participants' emotions would have made an important contribution to their overall adjustment to university. It is necessary to note however that limited research has been conducted looking at the role of emotions in university adjustment and hence the reported findings lack support from the literature. Therefore the findings reported in this paper present a potential avenue for future research.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the importance of social support to the transitional experience of Australian students entering their first year of university. The nature of this transitional period and the subsequent adjustment of the students' to university was found to centre around five major themes and they included social support, expectations, transitional issues, time management, and emotions.

Social support emerged as the most prominent contributing factor in aiding students' adjustment to university. Specifically it was revealed that students made a sound adjustment to the social and academic domains of university when they experienced support. In addition to aiding adjustment, social support also emerged as a salient factor in encouraging academic persistence in the students. These findings are consistent with findings from earlier research (e.g., Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Pratt et al., 2000) suggesting social support is a major mechanism in aiding the adjustment of students to university.

The four remaining themes were also found to be important contributors in the successful adjustment of students' to university. For example, the realistic expectations held by the majority of the participants, in regards to university, was believed to have a positive influence on their ability to adjust to their new environment. Furthermore, several issues related to transitioning emerged as being particularly challenging for the participants and consequently took some adjusting. For example, adjusting to the academic workload and changing one's daily

routine were areas that required some attention on the participants behalf. It was vital that the participants overcame such obstacles so as to ensure they were in an optimal position for adjusting successfully to university.

Although this study produced a number of encouraging findings, it is important to note that there was a disproportionate number of male and female participants. The recruited participants in this study consisted of mainly female students and it is possible that female students have a different transitional experience to that of the male student. Therefore one must be cautious not to assume the transition to university is identical for both males and females. Despite this the results do present some practical recommendations for enhancing the adjustment of first year students to university. It is suggested that the tertiary institutions themselves could become actively involved in the transition of first year students to university by implementing programs that aid this process. For example, a peer mentor or buddy program is an effective initiative for developing social contacts amongst the entering students and provides an informal forum in which students can obtain information on all aspects of university.

An additional recommendation centres on the implementation of university preparation classes. Such classes should be made available to all entering students and could take place over the course of one or two days prior to the commencement of first semester. Topics worth covering include an introduction to academic writing and research, what students can expect from the university, their lecturers, and tutors, as well as the expectations of the university from the student. Other areas that should be acknowledged include time management techniques, stress reduction techniques, and the importance of self care. This would be a worthwhile and rewarding initiative for students as it would enlighten them on what to expect from university, expose them to the academic nature of university, and also provide them with valuable practical skills. The combination of these elements would ensure the students are well prepared for advancing beyond the challenges commonly encountered in the first year of university.

A final recommendation concerns social activities. Each faculty within a university should consider incorporating social gatherings into the semester calendar as this would encourage students to interact with one another and thus develop friendships. This study has effectively demonstrated the importance of friendships/relationships in aiding university adjustment and encouraging academic persistence, and therefore this proposed recommendation would be a useful initiative for enhancing this process.

In conclusion this study has highlighted the importance of social support during the transition of first year students to university. Social support not only enhanced students' ability to adjust to their new environment but also increased the likelihood of such students persisting with their academic studies. A potential direction for future research includes investigating how males and females, as well as mature age students and school leaver students, differ in their transitional experiences and adjustment to university. Furthermore, one may be inclined to focus on the under-researched themes that emerged in this study as being important contributors to the adjustment process. This additional research would be most valuable in enhancing our understanding of social support, transition, and university adjustment.

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