

A guide to life at university

For parents of new students

How can parents help?

Being a university student provides an opportunity to develop some excellent life management skills. This will help not only at university, but also beyond.

Parents can help support their university student by understanding the challenges and rewards of being a student, and the necessary self-management and life skills needed to meet those challenges.

Useful Life- and Self-Management skills for university students include:

- Learning to look after *physical health*
- Being aware of *personal safety* issues
- Knowing how to *manage finances*
- Keeping a *balanced lifestyle* to avoid stress
- Having *intellectual discipline and flexibility* to complete the degree
- Developing *social confidence and competence* as key components of interacting on campus and in the wider workforce

Academic lifestyle

For the recent school leaver, university is very different from high school. There is more independent learning, with more topics being covered in less time. Students have flexibility with timetables, and it is up to the student to attend lectures and tutorials, however many classes have an attendance requirement. With this increased level of independence comes a need for responsibility and time management.

Studying at university may also require developing different study skills. At university, there is a greater emphasis on critical and analytical thinking. There is also less access to lecturers/tutors, and classes are larger than school class sizes.

University as a cultural experience

Success at university involves adapting to a new environment and a new culture, with a unique atmosphere, social rules, and expectations. Students will need to adjust to their university culture irrespective of whether they live locally, are from rural/regional/remote areas, from interstate, or from overseas.

There are ways that students can ease themselves into the university culture, including signing up for a peer mentor or joining campus-based social clubs.

Culture shock and life management skills

Living at home as an adult and attending university – As students transit from high school to university and, from teenage years to adulthood, different dynamics will evolve within the family. Conflict may arise from changing relationship dynamics. Tension may also increase with exam stress. Accepting that these reactions are normal will go far in maintaining harmonious relationships.

Moving out of home – Living independently for the first time is not easy. Life skills that are necessary include learning to get along with others (if sharing accommodation), managing finances, cooking and cleaning, juggling studies with paid employment, and finding time to socialise with family and friends. Time management skills will be extremely helpful, as will be conflict resolution, negotiation, and assertive communication.

Moving to Sydney from rural/regional/remote areas, interstate, or overseas – For these students, there may be multiple adjustments required – adjusting to living independently, managing finances, doing housework, adjusting to a different city, adjusting to university life, adjusting to a different learning style. Sydney may be different in many ways to what students are used to – the pace will be different, there are different 'informal rules' to living in the city, including how to navigate public transport or

where to socialise. For international students, there is also the different cultural experience.

Homesickness is also often an issue as students move away from family and friends. To help ease into university life in Sydney, it is important to recognise that things will be difficult initially, maybe even for the first six months. Encourage your student to develop new social networks by signing up for a peer mentor or for campus-based clubs/societies. Encourage them to get involved in university life.

Communication – why it is a critical skill

Studying with others from different cultures may involve developing effective communication with students and lecturers/tutors from both English-speaking and non English-speaking backgrounds. Essential communication skills will include:

- Accepting that others have different ways of communicating verbally and non-verbally, including tone of voice, sentence structure, level of eye contact, and amount of personal space.
- Recognising that students from non English-speaking backgrounds are often worried about their proficiency in English and can feel uncomfortable speaking.
- Being willing to work at understanding what the other person is saying.

Working on group projects – University work often involves group projects. First and foremost is learning to manage the expectation that projects will need to be achieved by consultation with others in the team. Essential skills include listening to others' opinions and ideas, clarifying expectations and roles of each team member, sharing knowledge, following through on assigned tasks, keeping all team members in the loop regarding progress, and working in collaboration.

Communicating with academics – Academics have limited time and many students. To maximise time with academics, students should make an appointment and be clear about what they would like to gain from meeting with the academic. With communication via email, it is important to give the academic opportunity to consider questions rather than expect a response within the hour. Respecting the academic's time is critical, as is being assertive in terms of following up with academics.

University and social life

Join university-based clubs or societies – This gives students the opportunity to interact with other students with similar interests. Being part of a club also builds important skills such as conversation skills, listening skills, being open to individual differences, perhaps even organisational skills depending on the student's level of engagement within the club/society.

Learning about intimate relationships – Romantic relationships between students are common at university, and these have a significant impact on developing attitudes and ideas about relationships. There are many life skills that are essential for developing healthy intimate relationships. These include respecting each other, being trustworthy and honest, valuing the other's opinions, assertive communication, managing emotions that come with disappointment or rejection, and also negotiating and practising safe sex or abstinence. Communicating expectations is also important to help avoid misunderstanding.

Finally, having an identity independent of the relationship by maintaining separate interests and friends is critical to healthy relationships – after all, relationships involve two people; they do not fuse into the one person, and it is healthy to maintain separate interests.

Developing and maintaining friendships – Social networks change in the transition from school to university. Contact with friends from school may decrease, and contact with university friends is likely to increase. Maintaining old friendships involves skills such as making time to catch up, recognising that relationships do change over time, and sharing important events and experiences. Developing new friendships requires skills like learning to initiate conversation with others, showing respect and a genuine interest in the other person, effective communication, and listening skills.

For both types of friendships, it is important not to impose personal expectations of how a friend should behave but instead accept the friendship for what the friend has to offer, not to 'keep score' in terms of whose turn it is to initiate contact, and also learning to forgive when it is necessary.