

## Thriving or just surviving? Exploring student strategies for a smoother transition to university. A Practice Report

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### Abstract

*The first year of university study is one of the greatest transition periods in a student's life. It is a time where they have to learn new academic skills as well as new social and independent living skills. For many students, the struggle to balance the competing demands of study, work and personal commitments feels overwhelming and they report significant declines in their overall health and well-being. However, some students appear to thrive in this new learning environment. This presentation reports on the findings of a research project investigating the health and well-being of first year students in Australia. It compares the experiences and coping strategies of "thriving" students with those who describe themselves as "just surviving." Forming close social relationships with peers, having good time management and organisational skills, together with effective coping strategies enable students to transition more successfully into university life.*

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## Background

The decision to attend university is one increasingly encouraged by schools and parents, as well as the Australian government (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Overall, the university experience can be an important opportunity for personal growth and development. For many school leavers deciding to accept a position at university, this heralds one of the most significant steps toward independence and adulthood they may have taken so far. For adult entry students moving from the workforce back into further study, this shift also presents many new opportunities for embarking on new academic and career goals. Additionally, it is also an important opportunity for all new students to expand social circles and interact with others who share similar passions and interests (Shim & Ryan, 2012). However, for too many students, this great opportunity for personal growth and learning is overshadowed by the poor health behaviours and negative health outcomes that can accompany this significant point of transition (Douglas et al., 1997; Von Ah, Ebert, Ngamvitroj, Park, & Kang, 2004).

University students tend to report decreases in physical activity (Leslie et al., 1999; Wallace, Buckworth, Kirby, & Sherman, 2000), increases in recreational drug use (Hallett et al., 2012; Kypri, Cronin, & Wright, 2005), and poor dietary practices compared to people of the same ages in the workforce. Greater levels of psychological distress are also more commonly seen in university students compared to their non-university peers (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010; Stallman, 2010). Often students belonging to non-traditional cohorts, such as relocating students, first in family, those from low-SES areas and adult

entry students, are seen to experience further increased risk of experiencing these negative health outcomes (Abbott-Chapman, 1994; Bitsika, Sharpley, & Rubenstein, 2010; Goto & Martin, 2009; Lewis, Dickson-Swift, Talbot, & Snow, 2007; Von Ah, et al., 2004), as well as higher attrition rates compared to students from more traditional pathways (Nicpon et al., 2007; Tinto, 2010). The first year period of transition is often found to be the most difficult for students in terms of both health and academic outcomes, while also being the time when decisions about leaving university are often made (Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2007).

Many complex and interacting factors influence whether students stay or leave University following their first year transition (Glogowska et al., 2007). Whilst many students struggle during this period, there are those who are seen to thrive in these new conditions, even when faced with similar university pressures as their fellow students. So how can we encourage these types of thriving behaviours in the rest of the student population? The current study investigates how students from both Health and Education disciplines experience the first year transition, with particular focus on those students who describe themselves as *thriving* compared to those who are *just surviving*. These students are the future of our health and education systems. Therefore, it is important to ensure these students graduate with not only good academic skills but also those generic skills required to be effective in these demanding professions.

## Methods

This report discusses a pilot survey which is part of a larger project examining the

**Table 1: Summary of 2011 survey participants' demographic details (%)**

Gender		Age			Discipline		Other	
Male	Female	<21	21-29	30+	Hlth	Edn	Relocated*	1 <sup>st</sup> in family^
18	82	75	14	11	63	37	30	45

\* having to change living address in order to attend university

^ determined as student with no immediate family members having attended university (parent/guardian or sibling)

health and wellbeing of first year students. An anonymous online survey was distributed in 2011 to first year students during the second semester from both Health and Education disciplines. Ethics approval from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee was granted and students were informed that their identity would remain anonymous at all times and that their participation in this project was completely voluntary. Participants first responded to a series of closed-ended questions to collect demographic data, followed by a series of open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of their health and wellness over their first year transition into university studies. Questions on participant's expectations of what university would be like, in addition to specific factors around changes in physical health, mental wellbeing and social activity were included. Strategies for coping during stressful times and balancing competing demands during the year were also explored.

## Findings

From the total commencing cohorts from the Health and Education disciplines of 1,050 students (643 Hlth, 408 Ed), 139 completed responses to the pilot surveys were received. This corresponds to a response rate of 13%. As survey responses were relatively low, only mean percentage data is presented, along with thematic and frequency analysis of open-ended responses. See Table 1 for a summary of the participants' demographic details.

Responses were then filtered according to students' response asking whether they were thriving, coping OK, or just surviving. Only students who indicated *thriving (T)* or *just surviving (JS)* were included in further analysis. Of the 139 students who completed responses, 17 (12%) said they were thriving and 27 (19%) were just surviving.

### *Presence of supportive and meaningful relationships*

While the majority of students in both groups indicated that new friendships had

been made during their first year, the types and quality of friendships appeared to differ greatly. When *T* students were asked about new friendships formed, they more often described positive events about spending time with new “uni” friends, studying together and socialising outside of classes together. *JS* students referred to friendships formed at university of being quite temporary (duration of course/assignment only), only “in-class,” and of missing many of the friendships lost following the commencement of university studies.

Differences in interactions with staff members were also evident, with many of the *T* students mentioning positive student-staff interactions. These *T* students were also more likely to develop supportive learning communities with their peers that extend beyond the classroom and provide a sense of support and belonging, especially during high stress periods (e.g. exams).

*I spend time with my friends or pair something stressful such as exam revision with spending time with my friends (study group). (Thriving - Female 18)*

*Because we are all doing it together, studying the same thing and we all bounce off each other. (Thriving - Female 18)*

Whereas *JS* students often felt that support from university friends and staff, especially in the large first year courses, was lacking and was less than expected.

*I have friends at uni and feel like I can communicate with most tutors etc. but there are times where I feel like I'm just a number and they don't have the time or care to speak to me and answer the questions I have. (Just Surviving - Female 18)*

## **Social activity involvement**

All students commented on the differences between the university social life and that which they came from. The relatively unstructured university study style was seen to both help and hinder students interacting and building quality friendships. Students *JS* more often reported a decrease in social activity involvement, with many peer social interactions restricted to class time at university, or only occasional extracurricular contact due to time pressures of study, work and other commitments. Another reason many of these students found their social activities decreasing was an absence of close peers to engage with in external social activities. This was especially true for those *JS* students who had relocated to attend University. Relocating students often mentioned keenly feeling the loss of their friends and family from their home town, and the difficulty they found with making new friends.

On the other hand, many of the *T* students commented that although the types of social activities they participated in had changed over this transition period, the frequency of and satisfaction gained from these activities had improved compared to before starting university. They spoke about finding peers with similar interests and being able to spend time talking about both their studies and topics external to the university environment.

## **Mental health changes**

When students were asked to rate changes in their mental health during their first year, some alarming yet unsurprising trends were observed. No *T* students reported their mental health as changing in

a negative way during their first year; responses were that it had stayed the same (53%) or changed for the better (47%). They also stated that university either met or exceeded their expectations in a positive way. On the other hand, 63% of JS students rated their mental health as changing for the worse and described university as being worse than they had expected. Only one student stated that mental health had improved and this was regarding the learning of new topics of interest. Feelings of stress, anxiety and being overwhelmed were very common.

### **Coping with stress**

Ability to cope with stressful times during the year was also explored, and was also another area where large differences existed between these two groups of students. *T* students described using strategies that were much more focused on taking action related to the stressor in order to deal with the stress and then be able to relax afterward than the *JS* students.

*I try to focus more on studies during those times and ask for help to the lectures when I am stuck on something. (Thriving – Female 17)*

*Talking about it with uni friends and seeking their help when I need it. (Thriving – Female 18)*

Most of the *JS* students nominated passive or avoidance strategies for dealing with the stressful event, which tended to leave them feeling even worse once they were required to return and deal with that stressor.

*I ignore everything and try to put them on hold until I can cope with them one at a time. (Just surviving – Female 18)*

*By crying whenever I'm stressed. (Just Surviving – Female 18)*

### **Balancing study, work, family and personal commitments**

Students were also asked how they balance study, work, family and personal commitments while studying, and it was no surprise to see that many of the *JS* students admitted to feeling like they were not balancing these competing demands well at all. They tended to be much more negative about their abilities to cope, seeming helpless in their situation.

*There is no balance. There is stress and chaos and tears. I rarely go out, I do what I need to for my children and I study through the night when they're in bed and I can hear myself think. (Just Surviving – Female 28)*

The *T* students however, realised that their lives were now more complicated with additional commitments demanding attention; however they were more positive in the language used to describe how they managed. Many of their comments related to good time management and ensuring they left themselves time to do things they enjoyed, whereas the *JS* students did not feel they had time for many enjoyable and relaxing activities when times got hard.

*By not letting this pile up; do it when it needs to be done. (Thriving – Male 18)*

*I use a personal diary to balance my life. I also use facebook and my phones calendar. (Thriving – Female 18)*

### **Conference discussions and reflections**

When asked how *T* and *JS* students would be recognised in their own institutions,

conference delegates engaged in lively discussions about the various students they had encountered. Many of the descriptions that arose were consistent with those found in the literature—that thriving students are engaged intellectually, socially and emotionally, while those just surviving tend to be isolated, disillusioned and overwhelmed. Additionally, the development of non-academic skills such as interpersonal skills and forming social relationships, coping and stress-management, as well as organisational skills were recognised as being just as important as academic skills for a successful integration into the new university environment (Nicpon, et al., 2007; Shim & Ryan, 2012).

An important point raised in later discussions was that encouraging and enhancing student relationships within the university environment is crucial to their ongoing integration and success in their first year of study. Delegates shared how their own institutions are working to engage first year students, ranging from compulsory units embedded in the first year curriculum to separate counselling and support services. Challenges associated with both approaches were raised: For example, separate services frequently had poor attendance by those students most in need while embedded support often increased staff workload. Finally, all delegates agreed that more could and should be done to encourage student success during first year. It was suggested that the responsibility for achieving this should be shared between both students and their higher education institution; in so far that students make the most of opportunities presented while institutions strive to provide enriching environments which encourage social, emotional and intellectual engagement.

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