

Transition to University¹

Heading off to university is one of the most exciting and challenging times of most people's lives. For many, entering the course of their choice is the culmination of many years of study and some difficult decision-making.

All students, regardless of their personality or educational or cultural background, will experience a period of transition when they come to university. Successful students are those that can recognize and accept transition for what it is - a natural period of adjustment - and seek help and advice when necessary.

The four main types of transition that university students will face are Academic, Geographic, Administrative and Social.

Academic transition

One of the biggest challenges for new students is coping with the new and very different academic demands of university. Students coming from school will notice dramatic differences between secondary and tertiary education, and students who have had a gap year or a longer break might find it difficult to readjust to academic work itself. International students usually take some time to learn to study in an Canadian context, particularly if English is not your first language.

Teaching and learning: Not only will you have to adjust to new styles of teaching, you might even have to get used to a different style of teaching for each of the subjects you study. Also, the way you learn at university may be very different to the methods you've used before.

Class formats: You will be in unfamiliar class formats such as lectures, tutorials and practical sessions.

Assessment formats: Most students take time to learn what is expected in a university-level essay, lab report or exam.

Independence: You will find that a new level of independence is expected of you: you will need to be a lot more self-motivated and work out for yourself how much study to do.

Grade structure: The different grade structure at university can result in marks lower than you might be accustomed to.

Volume and pace: Depending on your subjects you might find that the amount of work, and the speed at which you need to learn, increases noticeably.

Contact hours: Students' experiences vary depending on their course: some will have a very full timetable of 30 class hours a week, while others may have only 12, but a lot of your study and research time will take place outside your actual class contact hours.

Geographic transition

Getting used to a university campus, a new city or even a different country can be tough for new students, but it's good to remember that everyone can feel lost when they are in a new and unfamiliar place.

Size of campus: Queen' is a relatively small campus, but you still need to take time to find the places you need to know about.

Class locations: Having classes all over campus leaves many feeling lost and rushed.

New city or country: Feeling lost is an issue especially significant for students who have moved away from home and who are also becoming oriented to a completely new city, country or even new language.

Travel arrangements: Most students will also have to negotiate a new transport system.

Administrative transition

Universities are very large institutions that can be confusing. Administrative transition is often overlooked by students: getting and staying on top of all your admin is absolutely essential.

University and you: If you've come from school, you (and your parents) will have to get used to the fact that all of the University's communication will be with you: no more newsletters or reports.

Timetable: You will have to organize your own timetable and sort out any clashes that might occur.

Enrolment: It is your responsibility to enrol (and re-enrol for subsequent semesters) on time.

Due Dates: You need to keep track of all due dates for enrolment, assignment dates, fee dates, etc.

Email: It is expected that during semester and end-of-year breaks, that you will stay in touch by regularly checking and responding to emails sent to your university account.

Online: A lot of this university communication and administration will happen online, so make sure you have skills in using email and the internet.

Social transition

Most students look forward to the independence of being a university student, but many are unprepared for how to deal with the responsibility that comes with this new-found freedom. Suddenly you're in charge of your own life and you have to deal with changing friendships groups, new financial demands and start thinking seriously about study/life balance.

Adolescence to adulthood: If you're moving from school to university, this is an important phase of moving from adolescence to adulthood with increased responsibilities, independence and freedom.

Increased responsibility: You need to manage your own life: get groceries, do laundry, doctor, dentist, etc.

Culture and lifestyle: No matter where you are from, university is a whole new culture, you will take some time to settle into a very different culture and lifestyle.

Friends: You may no longer be surrounded by old friends and sometimes find yourself feeling isolated without familiar support networks - this is particularly acute for those who have moved away from home and experience homesickness. Even if you come to university knowing a lot of people already, you will meet many new friends and perhaps find your friendship groups changing.

Finances: You may find yourself having to juggle competing financial demands, part-time work and budgeting for the first time.

Accommodation: Dealing with housemates and landlords is another new experience for students moving out of home.

Balance: Many students find that one of the biggest challenges is learning how to balance their academic life with the exciting opportunities outside of class, including meeting new people, joining clubs and trying new activities.

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¹The University of Melbourne, Australia. Academic Enrichment Services, Transition and Orientation Programs. Last modified October 20, 2009. Data retrieved February 6, 2010.
<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/transition/transition/index.html>