

Support for Commencing Students at Risk

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| Title | Support for Commencing Students at Risk |
| Overview | Describes arrangements for the provision of a support program be offered to all students commencing undergraduate studies for the first time. |
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| Scope | All undergraduate courses |
| Related documents | |
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| Business Owner | Office of the Provost |
| Contact Name/extension/email | Michael Coyle/40524/ mfcoyle@unimelb.edu.au |

Support for Commencing Students at Risk

Definitions: (NB. These are working definitions that may be changed to ensure consistency with terminology employed in the Student System).

Commencing student: Entering a course type (undergraduate, postgraduate coursework, research) at the University of Melbourne for the first time. A re-enrolling, or re-admitted student is not a 'commencing student', nor is a transferring student, nor a student entering an Honours program¹.

First year student: a student entering the first year of their degree study.

Students Potentially at Risk: Refers to students commencing tertiary study who are judged to be at risk of not making satisfactory progress in their courses.

Interim Assessment: Assessment tasks that are completed and submitted early within the teaching period for a particular subject.

Unsatisfactory Progress: normally, failure to pass a defined percentage of the points, or failure in compulsory or core subjects² undertaken towards a course.

Policy: All Undergraduate courses³

The University is committed to being student-centric and to providing a high quality learning experience.

The University also takes a proactive approach to the monitoring of the progress of students to ensure that those enrolled make satisfactory progress.

Specific processes are designed to identify students in need of specialist support and advice, especially with regard to:

- students being able to maintain academic success and esteem;
- maximising student retention (avoiding the negative impact of failure on students and the costs of attrition);
- assisting students' commencement in tertiary study at the University (and consequently reducing the costs and pain associated with unsatisfactory progress);
- delivering on the University's moral and legal obligation to students and society.

Dedicated Student Advisers are responsible for a number of interventions conducted throughout the lifecycle of a student from application to graduation, in order to provide targeted advice and support to students.

¹ Although a faculty may consider offering support to students entering Honours, or for cohorts within those entering the Honours year, such as students from other institutions.

² Including failure in a hurdle requirement within a compulsory subject.

³ This policy does not prescribe an approach to providing support to students commencing studies in a course at a postgraduate level. Graduate Schools have responsibility for ensuring that suitable transition and orientation programs are in place for their students. This may involve a program that offers targeted support similar to those recommended for undergraduate degrees. A University policy with regard to support programs for graduate students entering higher study for the first time may be developed over time.

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Entering tertiary study poses many challenges for new students, such as managing increasingly complex and competing tasks, understanding the implicit conventions of the academy and studying independently, to name just a few. All students commencing tertiary study may be directly targeted with the offer of support to assist this process.

One aspect of this intervention will focus on students who, by virtue of identifiable characteristics, are likely to gain particular benefit from specific enrichment or well-being services and, consequently, be more likely to make satisfactory progress through their course. Another aspect will recognise that commencing students, although capable of study at a tertiary, may not have developed all the skills required to meet the associated challenges.

The 'Student Advising Model' provides additional information on processes for providing support and advice to students throughout their studies. The Transition and Orientation Programs Office coordinates orientation & transition programs more generally.

Early Intervention in Undergraduate Degrees

As well as responding to students who fail subjects by implementing targeted interventions detailed in the policy on unsatisfactory progress, the University will take measures to identify and assist students potentially at risk early on in the subjects in which they are enrolled.

This identification may include:

1. A commencement questionnaire, which:
 - enables the identification of students in a higher risk category,
 - provides this information to staff responsible for transition, and then (if necessary),
 - enables intervention, when there is concern or evidence of potential failure based on this interim assessment;
2. Identification as a result of membership of a cohort of students known to experience a disproportionate level of difficulties compared to other students, such as identification as a result of the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) during orientation;
3. Evaluation of interim assessment in first year subjects, and;
4. Identification as a result of concerns raised by any staff member (academic or professional) about any student, which might arise because of their behaviour, appearance or other signs, such as non-attendance.

This targeted approach to first year students is designed to enable each student to understand - and therefore be able to take full responsibility for - all aspects of their subject enrolment including attendance at classes, private study and completion of assessment requirements. With this in mind, systematic approaches to students 'at risk' in the later years of their courses are confined to those students specifically identified by teaching staff. Usually such identification is the result of continued poor performance in one area, such as language skills, or a change in the practice or performance of a student previously achieving at an acceptable level.

All approaches to students potentially at risk, however, are designed to provide relevant, targeted information and advice that may assist students to overcome whatever difficulties they are experiencing, and to make therefore satisfactory progress in their courses. This policy is specifically not designed to take the place of help-seeking behaviour on the part of

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commencing undergraduate students who realise that they are experiencing difficulties with their studies. Reasonable conscientious self-awareness is expected of students.

Procedure and Practice: All Undergraduate degree courses

1. *Interim Assessment in subjects taken in a student's first teaching period of their enrolment*

- Each level 1 subject in an undergraduate course that can be taken in a student's first semester of enrolment **must** offer at least one assessment task that is completed (submitted, marked and returned to the student) within the first six weeks of first semester (e.g. first practical report, in-class test, attendance requirement etc.) This is particularly significant for University breadth subjects, as multidisciplinary subjects may be very new to students and there may be a need for early academic feedback.
- Students may be identified by the subject coordinator (or, for subjects with large enrolments, on the report of other teaching staff assessing work submitted in-class) as being potentially at risk of failing that particular subject, based on performance in this assessment⁴.
- Details of students potentially at risk should be conveyed to the relevant Student Centre by the subject coordinator.

2. *Identification based on membership of a cohort*

Information provided by the student at the point of their application and enrolment that provides details about their circumstances may be used (provided privacy obligations are respected) to make an offer of support to the student, and to provide targeted advice about the specific services available to students who may especially benefit from this additional support.

Cohorts include students who:

- are from a non-English speaking background;
- completed English Language testing as part of their application, or were recommended to undertake the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) during orientation, with results and recommendations for follow up support available through the DELA database (ADAM);
- applied under an access or equity category; and,
- hold a Melbourne Access or Equity scholarship⁵.
- Information provided might be stored in a database and used to compile a package of relevant targeted information and assistance that is sent to the student early in their first semester of enrolment.

3. *Commencement Questionnaire – Recommended for First Year Students in New Generation Degrees*⁶

⁴ Constructive feedback on these early assessment tasks, explaining how a student may improve their performance, is an adjunct to the process of offering support under the Commencing Students at Risk Policy and may avert some students becoming disengaged with the subject.

⁵ The Melbourne Scholarships Office holds an Academic Progress Review of scholars every semester to identify scholars "at risk" of not meeting their scholarship requirements.

⁶ This process is based upon current practice in the Faculty of Science.

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- As part of the online enrolment process, students may be asked to complete a short survey designed to elicit information about their circumstances⁷. The questionnaire is compiled based on data collected through the monitoring of student progress and other relevant research.

Questions should be targeted to particular cohorts if possible (e.g. specific questions relating to students entering tertiary study for the first time, may not be relevant to others commencing with tertiary level experience, or to mature age students).

Questions may include:

- Will you be moving out of the family home for the first time this year?
- Are you planning to combine paid employment with study and, if so, how many hours per week will you work?
- Would you like the University to send you information about:
 - Student Housing Services?
 - Student Financial Aid?
 - Careers & Employment⁸?
 - Counselling Service?
 - [Or other service]?
- Are there any factors that you feel may affect your ability to engage with/ be successful at the University?⁹
- Do you feel confident in your ability to study independently, managing competing tasks within a deadline?
- Information provided is stored in a database and is used to compile a package of relevant targeted information and assistance that is sent to the student early in first semester.
- The questionnaire will include an explanation of why the University is undertaking this research and details what will be done with the information, and explicitly note that the purpose is the provision of systematic support to students who may benefit from it¹⁰.
- Although optional, students will be strongly encouraged to complete the commencement questionnaire as it will enable tailored support based on their answers.
- Each Student Centre will be responsible for reviewing the transition questionnaire results and coordinating follow-up with targeted students.

4. *Providing support to students 'potentially at risk'*

- The Student Centre is responsible for notifying each student that they have been identified as potentially at risk, and for providing general advice about actions that

⁷ This would not be part of the student system - it may be a hyperlink to web-based survey in the "Next Steps" page on the initial enrolment wizard the SSP intends to develop for the go live of the new student system, but how this is to be delivered, including targeting of certain cohorts, will be considered at a later date.

⁸ Important for those who may have enrolled in the 'wrong course' or for the wrong reasons, e.g. high ENTER, or parental pressure.

⁹ A student would not need to elaborate on this point and would be encouraged to make contact with Student Centre staff to discuss support options.

¹⁰ Any perception that students may be identified and monitored in a prejudicial way must be countered.

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the student could take to improve their performance in the short term¹¹. Such advice might include:

- Attending all classes;
 - Allocating appropriate time to private study (taking account of external commitments to work and social activity);
 - For undergraduate students students, utilising first-year or other teaching/learning centres provided by faculties or schools;
 - Joining or forming a study group;
 - Consultation with tutors or lecturers about subject material or feedback on interim assessment;
 - Referral to academic and language support programs offered centrally by the Language and Learning Skills Unit and to discipline-specific programs offered through their Student Centre, such as workshops and online programs (e.g. AIRport);
 - Referral to the workshop program run by the Counselling Service and the Transition Program in the second half of semester which specifically targets commencing students potentially at risk;
 - Seeing a Student Adviser from their Student Centre;
 - Information about other well-being services to students (e.g. Disability Liaison, Counselling, Housing Services etc.).
- Advice provided to such students will be recorded in order to be able to review the success of the support offered in relation to progress in the course. Action or inaction by a student in response to the offer of advice and support may not be taken into consideration in any subsequent unsatisfactory progress review¹².

5. Identification by teaching staff³

- In addition to seeking advice from colleagues and other relevant University well-being or enrichment services and approaching students directly, a member of teaching staff who becomes concerned about a student may report these concerns to a Student Adviser in the relevant Student Centre.
- Whilst not exclusive, examples of warning signs¹⁴ include:
 - non attendance in the first four weeks of semester;
 - non or late submission of assignments;
 - behaviour in class, such as non-engagement, inability to relate with other students or disruptive behaviour; or,
 - exhibiting signs of being depressed, such as being excessively tearful, appearing confused, frequent expression of negativity¹⁵.

¹¹ This is not to imply that academic staff may not or should not provide similar advice to a student; rather, to ensure the full picture of a student's situation across their enrolment is understood, a coordinated approach for students evidencing problems in more than one subject is desirable, and this is facilitated by a course-wide consideration.

¹² This process is focussed on identifying students for additional support, not monitoring their progress. Students' failure results from multiple circumstances, and an ultimate fail in a subject may not be related to the reason for the offer of support. (Refer to the Unsatisfactory Progress policy).

¹³ More detailed information about the process of identification, confidentiality considerations, and duty of care, will be included in general Student Advising guidelines for staff.

¹⁴ The Counselling Service produces information on 'Identifying Students at Risk', which provides further details of potential warning signs.

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- A student should be advised that the staff member is concerned and that advice to the Student Centre that the student may benefit from support has been made¹⁶.
- Upon receipt of such a report, the designated Student Adviser will negotiate with teaching staff to determine an appropriate course of action to assist the student, if possible. Teaching staff may identify non-academic issues (i.e. interaction in class) and may wish to discuss appropriate means to address concerns about behaviour with a Student Adviser¹⁷.
- Appropriate action might include:
 - Notifying the student about the particular concerns of teaching staff¹⁸;
 - Suggesting the student make an appointment with a Student Adviser;
 - Providing the student with information about the 'Students with Academic Disadvantage' policy should the student wish to disclose an ongoing condition,
 - Providing the student with information about or referral to other relevant enrichment or well-being services provided for students.
- Advice provided to such students will be recorded to enable review of the success of the support offered in relation to progress in the course. Action or inaction by a student in response to the offer of advice and support would not usually be taken into consideration in any subsequent unsatisfactory progress review, unless the identification related to academic performance concerns previously identified by an Unsatisfactory Progress Committee.

6. *Support and training of staff*

- Student Advisers should seek advice, if required, from the relevant Student Centre Manager, or from other University enrichment or well-being services.
- All staff, including academic staff, but especially Student Advisers and designated Student Advisers with a responsibility for transition, should attend mental health training modules, which cover both identifying students potentially at risk and information about Counselling Service support including consultancy to staff on complex student presentations.
- The Transition and Orientation Programs Office coordinates orientation & transition programs more generally.

7. *Discretion*

¹⁵ The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Manual symptoms of depression, "If a person is clinically depressed they would have at least two of the following symptoms for at least two weeks:

- An unusually sad mood that does not go away;
- Loss of enjoyment and interest in activities that used to be enjoyable, and
- Lack of energy and tiredness." (Kitchener & Jorm, 2002: p.10)

¹⁶ A student should be given the opportunity to both decline the offer of services and to be identified as at risk – see *Appeals* below.

¹⁷ If behaviour is extreme, or inappropriate or disruptive, a staff member (usually the Student Adviser) may seek the advice of the Academic Registrar about appropriate actions, which may include an emergency exclusion if the circumstances warrant it (under the statute 13.1 Student Discipline, General Misconduct).

¹⁸ Students may be resistant to receiving a phone call etc saying they are "at risk" as a result of a report by an academic staff member, and sensitivity required when making such interventions.

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- Decisions about which students are identified as being at risk based on interim assessment should be made by negotiation between teaching departments and the relevant Student Centre, based on analysis of data gathered each time the subject is taught.
- Specific student advisers will be identified as having a responsibility for transition, advisers who will coordinate intervention programs and support other advisers providing assistance to students. Training of student advisers includes interpersonal communication skills and techniques, such as the appropriate use of open-ended questions, minimal encouragers, active (or reflective) listening and handling emotionally-orientated conversations, and information about some possible responses from students.
- The designated staff in each Student Centre should determine appropriate information and advice to be sent to students at risk identified on the basis of their results in interim assessment.
- Response to students identified as being potentially at risk because of something other than their enrolment questionnaire, membership of a cohort, or results in interim assessment in first year subjects is, firstly, at the discretion of the staff member concerned. That person may involve colleagues, including Student Advisers, in negotiation about an appropriate course of action in response to their concerns.
- Students themselves might identify and present themselves as being at risk, and accordingly be in need of appropriate support and referral by staff in Centres.
- The relevant Student Centre has responsibility for the administration of the enrolment questionnaire when used, the decision about whether to use cohort data to target services and advice, and decides what information to send to each student identified as 'potentially at risk'.

8. *Review & Reporting*

- There should be an annual review of the identification of students by membership of a cohort or by enrolment questionnaire, as results from previous years can provide a valuable indication of what questions need to be asked or what information needs to be gathered for a good assessment of risk factors. This will involve a detailed analysis of material, comparing academic outcomes for students who engaged in the process (according to the category – questionnaire/interim assessment/other reason - once identified) and those who declined involvement.
- Designated student advisers should collect qualitative feedback from students who have benefited from an intervention. This feedback may be collated in the form of a database of (anonymous) case-studies that highlights the effectiveness of the program(s), as well as indicating areas of improvement needed, both within the commencing students potentially at risk and other student support and advising procedures within the university.
- Periodically (at least every three years) the University will conduct a comprehensive data collection and analysis of information relating to identification of commencing students potentially at risk, and outcomes of interventions. This could compare academic outcomes for those students identified as potentially at risk who engaged in a response process and took up the offer of assistance, with those who were not able to be contacted, did not engage or participate in a contact with a student adviser, or

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otherwise declined assistance. The purpose of the review is to both identify opportunities for improvement and to ensure the program's benefits are understood and promoted.

9. Responsibilities of students

Students have a responsibility to contribute to their own learning experience by:

- Being aware of the learning objectives of each subject and how teaching and assessment is structured to enable them to demonstrate achievement of objectives;
- Considering an offer of assistance resulting from identification as a student who may specifically benefit from the services designed to support students; and
- Seeking assistance if they realise that they are experiencing difficulties with their studies.

10. Appeals

Appeals (for example, by a student who does not wish to be identified as at risk) should be dealt with according to the Student Grievance Policy.

