In October 2007, a series of student focus groups were conducted to explore issues related to the transition to RMIT - both ‘in classroom’ and generally.

Students were asked to think about their experience at RMIT, and to identify what worked well, what worked poorly and how they would describe the ideal experience.

The tables below summarise student responses as they relate to three persistent themes of student concern: teaching quality, program experience and social affinity.


### Table 1: Teaching quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Characteristic</th>
<th>Works well</th>
<th>Doesn’t work well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Interactivity**                                      | • **Opportunities for interaction:** Students appreciated teachers who provided designated question and answer times, activities that encouraged students to interact with one another or opportunities for general discussion.  
• **Quality discussions:** Postgraduate students in particular noted their appreciation of opportunities to engage in “intense, provocative (within reason) discussions”. Students felt that teaching staff should encourage class participation, but with care; some students can feel humiliated if pushed when not ready. | • **Pure content delivery:** Students consistently found staff who read directly from presentation slides very disengaging and, as one student said, “deadly boring”.  
• **Lack of opportunities for interaction:** Particularly in lectures, which students indicated were long and “three hours of straight talking”.  
• **Poor facilitation of interactions:** Although students want interactive classrooms, they expect the lecturer to maintain control; particularly when students “talk over the top of teachers and other students”. |
| **Challenging but supported learning:**                | • **Independent/challenging but supported learning environments:** Students appreciated the independence of the learning environment, but felt the adjustment was difficult as it was quite different to what they had been used to. Many were unprepared for the level and amount of work required and felt induction could be improved to better prepare them for the nature of the learning environment, the associated assessment requirements, quality of work expected and time commitments. | • **Unclear expectations and guidance:** Students want to be sure that they have an accurate understanding of what is required of them, with a number of students indicating that this guidance was inconsistent, lacking or provided too late. |
| **Teaching skills:**                                   | • **Teaching / communication skills:** Students indicated that the intelligence and research skills of some staff did not necessarily make them good teachers; they need to be able to effectively communicate their experience. One postgraduate student noted, “There tend to be teachers with research skills, and those with research and teaching skills … [who] are the best”. | • **Inconsistent content:** Students indicated that sometimes they receive mixed, uncoordinated messages from staff with “lectures going in one direction and tutes in another”. |
### Key Characteristic: Relevant experience

- **Works well:**
  - *Staff with industry experience:*
    Students stressed the value of staff with relevant and recent industry experience, suggesting that it "gives staff credibility". They enjoyed hearing from lecturers supplement theory with examples from their own "real-world" experience, which made lectures more interesting.

### Key Characteristic: Professional, approachable and interested in learning and teaching

- **Works well:**
  - *Interesting:*
    Students suggested that the most interesting teachers were those who "crack a joke" and tell stories to supplement the theory. It was important to consider the appropriateness of jokes and audience, as some were difficult for international students to understand; in some cases they felt they were the brunt of jokes, which humiliated them.
  - *Develops a rapport with students:*
    Students wanted to know about staff and appreciated it if staff gave a brief "bio" at the beginning of semester on their experience and achievements.
  - *Interested in student's progress:*
    Students also appreciated staff who went out of their way to provide guidance; a number were mentioned who had gone above and beyond what they expected in helping them.

- **Doesn’t work well:**
  - *Lack of professionalism:*
    Some students encountered staff "bagging RMIT"; in one example, a staff member approached with a query replied "I just come to work, I don’t know what's happening…I haven’t been paid my overtime yet". The student felt that they shouldn’t be dragged into the University’s politics. Students also noted staff arriving late for class (or not at all) and failing to inform students.
  - *Rude or unresponsive staff:*
    Students found some staff to be unapproachable and did not appreciate being "fobbed-off". One student approached a program coordinator about an inaccessible, rude teacher. The program coordinator told the student to “try to put up with it” and to ask other students if they had questions about the class.

### Table 2: Program experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Characteristic</th>
<th>Works well</th>
<th>Doesn’t work well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Communications**   | • *Communications:*
  Students found emails, updates and assessment reminders from staff very helpful when used; however, such use is very uneven across the University. | • *Lack of understanding – purpose of course components:*
  There was some uncertainty about the different purposes of lectures, tutorials, demonstrations and laboratories – compounded by the inconsistent use of these across courses. Students indicated that the purpose should be clear and that advice should be given on optimising learning outcomes from each. |
| **Assessment**       | • *Early assessment tasks:*
  Students appreciated early assessment tasks and feedback, as they indicated that it helped them to "kick start study", establish expectations, adjust behaviours and seek assistance accordingly. However, feedback lagged in some instances, negating the usefulness of these tasks. | • *Assessment misalignment, weight and timing:*
  Students indicated that it was sometimes difficult to see the link between assessment tasks and the stated course outcomes; if the course is marketed as being ‘practically focussed’, a high proportion of assessment tasks should reflect this. Students indicated that they often experienced high stress towards the end of semester with multiple, heavily weighted assessment tasks. Postgraduate students indicated that there were too many assessment tasks with one student stating that "they're often not too difficult but there are too many". |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Characteristic</th>
<th>Works well</th>
<th>Doesn’t work well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program flexibility</strong></td>
<td>• <strong>Flexibility:</strong> Students liked the flexibility of being able to choose their own timetables and appreciate when there are a range of timetable options available to accommodate their personal and work commitments.</td>
<td>• <strong>Enforced long summer break:</strong> A number of international students indicated that they would like the opportunity to undertake courses over the semester break to finish their program more quickly and hence reduce costs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Links with vocations and current industry practice** | • **Theory, practice and the role of work integrated learning:** Students appreciated RMIT’s “practically oriented” focus, and courses that had a balance between theory and practice. They appreciated working on “real-world” assessment tasks, such as projects for real clients and the ability to engage in work placements. However, some noted that communication about these opportunities and assistance building industry networks could be greatly improved. Some students attended a session about arranging work placements but indicated that they were left wondering “where do you start”.  
• **Guest lecturers:** Students enjoy hearing from industry lecturers, as they are able to offer insights into current practice and events. They also enjoy hearing from alumni; what they have achieved and the program and career pathways they have taken to get there. Students suggested “up to six high quality guest lecturers a semester” as part of their program. | • **Content that is not updated regularly:** With students placing a high value on relevance and industry engagement, they want certainty that the curriculum is updated regularly in line with current industry practice. Students take cues from many areas when assessing the relevance of a course to current industry standards/practice. For example one student discussed a lecturer who had given the same exam for five years running and justified doing so by saying that “they didn’t need to [change it], as not all students had received a High Distinction yet”. |
| **Student attributes**              | • **Group work:** A number of students (particularly in Business courses) raised the issue of using groups on assessment pieces with mixed feelings. Students suggested the University provide better guidance around establishing effective group dynamics, negotiating roles and resolving conflicts. | • **Group work:** Although generally students could see the benefit and importance of group activities, there was some resentment that other students would gain recognition for the groups work even if they had not adequately contributed.  
• **Wide variation in students’ academic and language capabilities:** Students indicated that varying skill levels between students was a source of frustration (particularly noted by postgraduate students), especially when this discouraged quality discussions and that the University needs to identify interventions to address this issue. |
| **Resourcing**                      | • **Small tutorials:** Although students would ideally like smaller lectures, they realise that this is difficult logistically. There was a sense that they were prepared to put up with larger lectures as long as tutorial numbers were limited, eg: less than fifteen students. They valued smaller tutorials as this was their main opportunity to interact with staff, ask questions and seek guidance. | • **Inconsistent use of online resources:** The inconsistent use of the Learning Hub by staff was a consistent complaint. Students indicated that the Learning Hub has highly valued attributes for them and that they would like to see improved consistency in its use by staff and enhanced functionality. |
Table 3: Social affinity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Characteristic</th>
<th>Works well</th>
<th>Doesn’t work well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support networks</strong></td>
<td>• <strong>Networks – friends and relatives:</strong> Regardless of origin, students found networks of friends and relatives very helpful in settling into study. These connections provide invaluable advice on what the experience is like, the processes to follow, the complications they might encounter and how to resolve them. Networks also provide important advice about living locally, the culture, accommodation, how to get around on the transport system and where to go (e.g. supermarkets, cheap eats etc). Those students that had access to a “buddy” commented favourably on their involvement; but not many students were aware of the availability of “buddies”.</td>
<td><strong>Lack of networks:</strong> Students indicated that not knowing anyone with prior higher education experience in Australia, Melbourne or RMIT exacerbated already high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. Many students didn’t know who to approach for information on expected learning styles and academic standards, what to call their teachers or how to meet other students. Whilst this issue was of less importance to postgraduate students but of particular concern to international students, it was raised in some way by all groups as contributing to feelings of isolation, uncertainty and loneliness. Students consistently mentioned the potential use of online functionality to support communications and networks. The extent to which these are currently used falls below student expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Events, communications and spaces to support a sense of belonging</strong></td>
<td>• <strong>Meet and greet:</strong> International students found a meet-and-greet helpful in initially getting to know one another and establishing friendships. Some students noted that the relationships that they had thus developed had been very effective in giving them an initial sense of belonging at a time of great uncertainty, and had led to enduring friendships. Those international students who came to RMIT with pre-existing friendships or networks identified these as strong positive factors in their early experience. • <strong>Welcome communications:</strong> Where received, students found the introductory emails from Heads of School welcoming. They reinforced for students that the University valued them (particularly postgraduates), and suggested that the institution was broader than the immediate program or school they regularly experience. • <strong>Developing community:</strong> All students sought opportunities to network and socialise within and beyond academic programs, noting this as important in creating a sense of belonging to both the general university community and specific program communities. Postgraduate students noted that such networks provide an important forum for confirming the professional and social value of further study (and hence validating their commitment).</td>
<td>• <strong>Difficulty finding information:</strong> Students indicate that it is often difficult to find critical information (either on-campus or online), including information about programs, timetables, study opportunities and information about broader engagement opportunities (such as clubs and societies). • <strong>Lack of time for involvement:</strong> Postgraduate students indicated that although they would like to be more involved socially with other students, their work and personal commitments would often prevent them from doing so; even if more opportunities were available. • <strong>Segregation of international and domestic students:</strong> International students observed that often students self-segregate by country of origin, with “Australia on one side, overseas students on the other” and that little effort was made to mix students. • <strong>Campus layout:</strong> Although students appreciated the central location of RMIT they also indicated that the dispersed layout of the campus is not conducive to building a sense of belonging to a University community. Business students in particular commented on the “office feel” of building 108, and reported generally going for classes only, and then leaving.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>