Background Reading

Appendix 2

RMIT Research and Analysis of Student Life

1 November 2002

Institutional Research Consultancy Unit, RMIT
BACKGROUND:
Structure of documents and literature review on the analysis of Student Life

The findings of the investigation of Student Life as a concept and a practical approach to structuring student support and learning services are presented in a report with two appendices.

Report: The Student Experience: Rethinking Conceptualisations of Student Experience at RMIT
- Drawing on material contained in Background Readings n Appendix 1 and 2 this report attempts to identify distinct models and approaches to Student Life/learning and student support structures
- It also identifies areas for further research and investigation.

Appendix 1: What is Student Life?
- Initial overview of the breadth of practical activities undertaken under the Student Life rubric domestically and internationally.
- Initial overview of literature conceptualising Student Life.
- Overview of some literature providing a snapshot of what constitutes student life in Australia.
- Identification of some issues and questions arising from literature review
- Identification of additional information required/areas for further research

Appendix 2: Review of RMIT research and analysis of Student Life
- Student Feedback
- RMIT Union Surveys
- RMIT Learning Support Review
- Student Outcomes Survey
- Approaches to Student Provision
- and other RMIT specific research

The three volumes should then feed into and inform the production of a strategy for implementing a Student Life approach for teaching, learning and student support services at RMIT.
# Background Reading Volume 2: Review of RMIT Research

## Reference Documents

### Recent Initiatives and Major Projects
- Career Management Project – including partnership with Morgan & Banks  
- Market segmentation in T&L strategy  
- Equity – Equity Strategy, Pathways Domain  
- Transition program and RMIT 101  
- Learning Support Review/ SAGE proposal  
- Business Process Reengineering/ AMS development  
- Academic policy – policy review, Student Charter  
- Student complaints/ Ombuds  
- Student Feedback Project

### Approaches to Support Provision
- Higher Education and TAFE Concurrent Support Report, 2000  
- RMIT University: Strategic Statement. 2002

### Student Feedback

### Postgraduate and Research Environment
- RMIT (December 2001). International Career Index Email Survey, RMIT: DSRD

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**Note:** RMIT Union Research includes:
- RMIT Union Research Report, March 2002, prepared by Cycle Landscape Design
- RMIT Union Arts, Culture & Community Services: Student Development and Leadership Officer – Mature Age and Rural Students Project Report, December 2001
- RMIT Union Student Leisure Survey
- RMIT Union Student Survey, November 2001, prepared by Sweeney Research
Review of RMIT Research

Recent Initiatives and Major Projects

There have been a number of major projects/initiatives to date:

Career Management Project – including partnership with Morgan & Banks

RMIT signed an MOU with Morgan & Banks, then the major Australian-owned career and recruitment services firm in Australia. The vision of the M&B/RMIT partnership encompassed a number of areas, including services to prospective and current students, alumni, RMIT staff and industry. One aim of the partnership was to improve RMIT graduate outcomes from very good (about 85% at that time) to excellent (100% or close to) by integrating career services with the student experience, with the aim of consolidating RMIT’s position as the “university of work”.

The vision for how students would experience this integrated experience is set out in the introduction to the report written by Geraldine Eagle in 1998 as part of the first stage of the project. This vision statement captured the following ideas which have continued to be important structuring ideas about student experience:

a) Structuring student services around the student’s career lifecycle – that is, looking at need from pre-enrolment, through to graduation and transition to the workforce, and on to services for alumni and industry. Linked to this is the idea of marketing careers not courses and that the RMIT experience is about an ongoing professional services and community relationship not about “purchase of a single product”.

b) Underpinning this lifelong relationship would be remodelled Customer Relationship Management involving streamlined processes and clever use of technology enabling students to access RMIT services internationally at any time. Specific initiatives: integrated “front door”, resume builder, employment services portal, student e-portfolio.

Of the above initiatives, some have come to fruition, in particular the Employment Services Portal (ESP), which incorporates a resume-builder and job search facility and the establishment of the Hubs. Others have been picked up through other projects, like the continued focus on graduate capabilities and work-integrated learning in Program Renewal.

It may be worth noting that the idea of an e-portfolio as a key integrative tool for students to use has not yet been realised, although many programs use portfolios for assessment etc.
Market segmentation in T&L strategy

The inclusion in the 2000-2002 Teaching & Learning Strategy of a segmentation of students into key market groups was also linked to the idea of student lifecycle as the structuring principle¹.

Equity – Equity Strategy, Pathways Domain

The market segmentation exercise has led to a sharper focus on priority equity groups, including the revision of the RMIT Equity Strategy in 2000, and the establishment of the Equity Strategy Committee. This work is now receiving even greater focus through the Pathways Domain.

Transition program and RMIT 101

RMIT 101 was first offered as an online orientation program for students in June 2000. The subsequent establishment of the Office of Transition also included an introduction to RMIT and assistance for students in the management of their learning. Considerable work has been done around orientation and academic transition issues.

Learning Support Review/ SAGE proposal

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor commissioned the Learning Support Review in 2000. Its aim was to review and identify improvements in academic learning support services. The Review reported in February 2001 and made a series of recommendations around principles for learning support and a new structure for delivering learning support (known by the working title of “SAGE – Scholarship and Guidance Exchange”). These recommendations were further developed by a working party however were never implemented. The development of the Hubs has adopted some of the related activity in terms of improved access.

Business Process Reengineering/ AMS development

The idea of RMIT’s services being structured around the “student lifecycle” was operationalised in the Business Process Reengineering (BPR) project which informed the development of the Academic Management System (AMS). A review in the context of the AMS remediation is currently underway that will investigate whether, or to what extent, the vision outlined in the BPR could expect to be delivered by the AMS alone and which services/processes need to be re-evaluated in the interest of stabilising the system. The University is committed to services being structured around the “student lifecycle” however with an added awareness that the AMS will be only one of the platforms upon which we can rely to access student data, rather than being able to deliver more in terms of services/processes as had originally hoped. The vision is still very much alive in terms of focus and commitment to delivering student-centred services/programs etc. The implications for RMIT in modelling student provision is that the AMS will not provide the necessary technological tools/delivery mechanisms as anticipated and that more conventional and possibly resource intensive options may need to be developed.

**Academic policy – policy review, Student Charter**

The current Academic Policy Review is aimed at streamlining administrative procedures to improve the student experience².

An RMIT Student Charter was also developed with broad consultation and approved in 2001, however its promulgation has been delayed by the AMS implementation³.

**Student complaints/ Ombuds**

RMIT adopted a Student Complaints Policy for the first time in 1997. The adoption of this policy has led over time to a more systematic approach to student complaints across the university, particularly focussed through the Office of the Academic Registrar.

RMIT has also established an Ombuds position to provide confidential advice and impartial review of student complaints which fail to be resolved through the standard processes.

**Student Feedback Project**

The Student Feedback Project began in 1998 with the aim of streamlining student feedback processes, improving the quality of student feedback available to RMIT and increasing the use of student feedback for improvement. It was also a response to the increased use of student feedback (especially from the CEQ) in external publications like the Good Universities Guide.

Each year since 1999, the “Top Ten Student Concerns” have been identified and action plans developed to address them. University-wide surveys have been conducted and all Faculties and Groups are required to have a Student Feedback Action Plan⁴.

**Approaches to Support Provision**

**Ruthven, P. K. (March 9th 2001). The Environment for RMIT University. Profiles Launch, RMIT, IBIS World.**

This report signaled environmental drivers for education in the next half century, including population change, social and economic, and technological changes. Ruthven proposes that the Information Age (or Infotronics Age) is dominated by new service industries, for households business and export markets and a new utilities sector (IT&T). He also proposes that the New Age is witnessing dramatic changes in lifestyles, demographics, social habits and attitudes, politics, jobs and characteristics of life in an increasingly borderless world. The Infotronics Age is marked by the outsourcing of services (household sand business) in the same way manufacturing and production were outsourced in the industrial age. This outsourcing will and is creating new industries, with the main sectors being telecommunication, finance and insurance, property and business services, government and admin, and education.

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The teacher in the New Age fulfills ‘tutor’ roles, that is, in terms of facilitating the learning process for the learner (learning how to learn); rather than the roles of custodian (giving pastoral care) and informer (providing information and knowledge). Overseas students and those that are over 30 years of age are increasing cohorts in Universities. Ruthven suggests that the best enterprises are focusing on single industries rather than diversifying and position themselves in niche markets. They are outsourcing non-core components and creating strategic alliances.


This report presented findings from a review chaired by Professor Robert Snow, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering. The review defined learning / student support as:

*The integrated support for students to become independent learners in a tertiary learning environment, encompassing the skills and understanding necessary to succeed in their chosen program of study and to move with confidence from one learning and social context to another less familiar context.*

The Review Reference Group confirmed that there were a number of service and support providers that contributed to the provision of learning support. Direct providers include the Learning Skills Unit (LSU), Disability Liaison Unit (DLU), Centre for English Language and Learning (CELL) and Faculties. The Review also recognised other providers including the Library and Support and Advisory.

The Review recommended the re-organisation of the existing services to improve co-ordination with the strategic planning process and to extend existing good practice in the provision of learning support in a rapidly changing context.

The Review found evidence of a widening gap between students needs and the current provision of learning support. Factors included:

- Greater range and level of skills particularly in relation to IT and self-management required in almost all professions and industry groups.
- Higher expectations that students be independent and self motivated learners.
- Fluctuations in the patterns of study, for example students changing courses, leading to less consistent preparation for courses.
- Impact of social changes in patterns of study and external pressures on students, especially work.
- Changes in the student population – more international students, more NESB students, and more mature age students.
- Increased incidence of physical and mental illness leading to increased diversity and complexity of need.

Many of those consulted in the Review commented that the traditional key learning support services for students – access to teachers for out-of-class consultations - had been eroded due to increases in administrative duties, increased numbers of sessional teachers and increased use of flexible delivery models such as intensive workshops. Many
submissions also emphasised the importance of peers, informal networks and study groups as sources of support for students’ learning.

The Review found many examples of good practice in Faculties and support services. However, it also concluded that the provision of learning support is uneven in coverage and concentrated in face to face and workshop style support. There was minimal use of other strategies such as integrated mainstream delivery, and online and independent learning materials. The Review found that students used a range of criteria in determining the quality of support available. These include:

- Timely access including location and portability and availability when approached.
- Quality of online access and query/search response.
- Relevance of the support to their discipline specific needs and competency.
- Perceived confidentiality of the support and sensitivity of the delivery.

To address these issues, the key recommendation of the Review was that RMIT develop a coordinated and strategic approach to learning support, underpinned by guiding principles of good practice. These included:

- Provide co-ordinated and strategic learning support services that are convenient for all students and use resources effectively.
- Integrate and align learning support provision with Teaching and Learning Strategy including course renewal and capability driven curriculum and IT Alignment Project including Distributed Learning System (DLS) initiatives.
- Develop inclusive learning communities at university and program levels and supporting students in transition to participate fully in these learning communities.
- Encourage and train students to act as mentors for other students.
- Develop all students as independent learners capable of self-assessing their needs, in particular by providing integrated support for their programs and through self-paced materials.
- Develop staff members’ ability to identify student learning needs and provide or refer students to appropriate support and supporting staff in their roles as Transition Co-ordinators, First Year Co-ordinators, Program Leaders and by providing learning resources that can be customised and integrated into programs.

The Review proposed:

- Improving access for students by re-organising services to support a ‘one stop shop’ model, both virtual and real.
- Improving integration of learning support and teacher skills in early identification of students ‘at risk’ through sustained professional development including programs, facilitated action learning and Faculty based improvement projects.
- Increasing collaboration between Faculties and teachers on initiatives to renew curriculum and improve course delivery including involvement of student services in course renewal.
- Improving the self-paced materials and resources available to both students and staff online and in print.
The following recommendations were endorsed:

That students be supported in their learning in three modes:

- Access to transition programs and self-paced resources [web, print].
- Mainstreamed integrated support at the program level by teachers and service providers working collaboratively.
- Individual access to intensive workshops, small groups and 1:1 consultations.
- That a new learning support unit, SAGE [Scholarship and Guidance Exchange] be developed to operate as a ‘one stop shop’ and with the capability to advise and support student learning needs including those related to literacy, English language, disability and transition. This unit will have primary responsibility of providing integrated support through professional development with teachers and will report through Academic Services.
- That LTS conduct professional development to support the new model of provision and support a pilot of the new modes of linking professional development and service delivery to students.

The reviewing findings did not adequately address issues of academic policy or program renewal in relation to integrating learning support into program development, across modes of delivery. While the Vice-Chancellor’s Executive Committee endorsed recommendations of the report, none of the options for change were adopted fully, with little change to organisational structures / processes since the review.


Comparisons between ATN universities showed that RMIT had less designated staff expertise in educational design, media production and professional development and less staff employed to provide academic support, despite having the largest student enrolments and staff / student ratio.

The report suggests that while all the universities have a central unit to provide support for teaching and learning, the structure and functions of units vary significantly. UTS, QUT and UniSA adopt service orientated models (i.e. to assist, improve, promote teaching and learning). In contrast Curtin, USQ and RMIT adopt a ‘directive’ model (i.e. ensuring appropriate use of technology, implement recommendations, strategic commitment).

New program development at QUT, UTS, UniSA and USQ begins with an initial resource assessment process that occurs in conjunction with the Library, Teaching and Learning Central Support Unit and Information Technology Services. The average time for program development (from conception to delivery) is 12 months, with the exception of QUT and UniSA that have longer development cycles. All approval processes across the universities included similar steps through, for example, faculty advisory committees, faculty boards, university course and program committees, then finally to Academic...
Board an University Council, QUT, USQ and RMIT have an additional step through the Vice-Chancellors Advisory / Executive Committee.

**Student Services Group. (2001). Annual Report, RMIT.**

As well as the mission and core services of each branch, the report comprised usage statistics and other developments, achievement and highlights of the service provision. The following summary is an analysis of some of the key performance outcomes that indicate particularly which student groups are targeted by each branch. The report did not generally provide information on trends.

The report indicated that there were 39 total enrolments in higher education of ATSI students in 2001, mostly at the undergraduate level. Retention rates were lower than those of other students at RMIT. There were 408 total ATSI enrolments in 2001.

Statistics from the Career Development and Employment branch indicate that the majority of teaching hours in programs were focussed to final year students. 43% of final year student participated in Preparation for Employment Programs (PEP’s).

The Chaplaincy indicated that core services were well suited to youth culture academic concerns and lifestyles, however no outcomes were indicated.

The Counselling service held 4880 one to one sessions in 2001, 58% with female students, 42% with males students, and 16% with international students. The top seven presenting issues in order were academic issues, relationship / personal, anxiety and stress, depression / mood disorder, family issues, self confidence / self esteem and grief / loss.

The Disability Liaison branch indicated that 900 students had been supported by the unit, which was 55.3% of total students identified with a disability.

The Health Service indicated that the most students had participated in the following Community Health Programs and activities: Orientation talks, Per-vaccination talks, Hep B immunisation for vocational placement, Mantoux immunisation for vocational placement, sexual health, and first aid courses. The report also indicated that a number of festivals and health promotions had been conducted such as Health Living for Academic Success Week, Alcohol and Drug awareness , Safer Sex Week and Mental Health Awareness Week, International Expo and Farewell, Sport and health day etc. The Patient Attendance statistics of the Health Service indicated that attendance was lower over the periods December – February as would be expected.

Support and Advisory Services (which includes Financial, Housing and Centre for International Students and Scholars) indicted that the most cited reasons for student loans were rent / bond / living expenses, course costs, computer costs and car expenses. In addition, the report displayed the number of visits made by students to the housing advisory services, including hits to the website. International students participating in a number of programs, including the University Returning Home Program. Overall, there were 7000 international students enrolled in 2001, from over 80 different countries. There were 60
AusAID students from 13 different countries enrolled at RMIT, with 35 continuing students in 2002. There were 26 IDP students enrolled.

The report indicated that the Office of Transition’s information kiosk on the City Campus attracted over 2,800 enquiries from 14th February to 13th March 2001.


The Strategy notes that RMIT’s approach to student support is increasingly challenged by changes in the educational context such as:

- Stronger focus on clearly articulated educational outcomes
- Differentiation of RMIT’s educational offerings in the market
- Greater focus on educational Program clusters, Program development and renewal, and Program quality assurance
- Increased on-shore international students and increasing off-shore delivery
- Flexible delivery including significant on-line and other off-campus access
- Decreasing availability of appropriate substitute services in the external environment
- Increased competition for limited resources.

For the past few years the RMIT SSG has focused on aligning its service delivery with RMIT’s Strategic Plan and related key documents e.g. RMIT Teaching & Learning Strategy. The Student Support Strategy 2002 – 2003 aims to develop student support services in line with RMIT’s emerging organisational priorities and core functions. The Strategy is framed around four major headings (Key Result Areas):

- Services for Students
- Services to Staff and RMIT
- Support for Program Teams
- Management of Critical Incidents

The major changes in direction for service delivery will be in the areas of services for students and support for program teams.

Like many other universities, RMIT has traditionally offered a broad range of services to its student community e.g. health services, counselling, financial advice etc..

**Ten core services** are currently available to students through the SSG:

- Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Unit
- Career Development & Employment Service
- Centre for International Students & Scholars
- Chaplaincy
- Counselling Service
- Disability Liaison Unit
- Financial Advisory Service
- Health Service
- Housing Service
- Transition Unit
Emergency services are also provided:
- After Hours Emergency Service (rural & international students)
- Medical Emergency Service (City, Bundoora & Brunswick)
- Psychological Emergency Service (City, Bundoora & Brunswick)
- “Drop-in” rapid assessment – all services.

In view of the changing context the strategy directs RMIT towards realigning service delivery with new priorities and organisational needs, including educational outcomes and financial efficiency. The major changes envisaged in service delivery priorities are:

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<tr>
<td>A broad range of generic services</td>
<td>Greater focus on the specific needs of particular programs and identified cohorts of students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Main focus on campus services</td>
<td>More emphasis on access for all students</td>
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<td>Limited self-help services</td>
<td>Greater access to resources, particularly on line</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Incident Management</td>
<td>Improved focus on services for students at risk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existing performance indicators</td>
<td>Revised performance criteria</td>
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**Strengthened Support for Program Teams**
The Strategy also emphasises stronger linkages with program development and renewal processes and teams, subject to the resources available to the SSG. The changes envisaged are:

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<th>From</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ad hoc consideration of support needs in program design</td>
<td>Systematic integration of support needs in program approval and renewal</td>
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<td>Limited assistance for staff who design programs</td>
<td>Networking with staff to provide resources e.g. templates &amp; checklists, to assist staff to identify support needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions of structural peripheralisation from core teaching &amp; learning processes</td>
<td>Seen as central to teaching and learning by relocation with the Office of the PV- C (Learning &amp; Scholarship)</td>
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Implications for Student Services Group Activities:
- Working more closely and directly with academic Program Teams to identify support needs of students within particular Programs and within particular student cohorts e.g. mass, niche, pathways etc.
- Promotion of self-help approaches for students where practicable through greater access to self-assessment tools, resources and services on line
- Redirection of focus and resources from “generic” to “targeted” services and support
• Development of additional support resources for staff to assist in integrating appropriate student support in programs
• Working closely with other functions and stakeholders to ensure student services are fully integrated throughout all of RMIT’s academic activities and relevant policy areas
• Continuing to build on the Group’s capabilities to deliver in priority areas
• Reviewing Key Result Areas for service delivery in Group Action plans
• Maintaining services offered to individual staff where practicable
• Continuing to assist with the management of emergencies and critical incidents.

Higher Education and TAFE Concurrent Support Report, 2000

The Higher Education support program adopted a triangulated approach by incorporating teaching provided by LSU staff into scheduled lecture times. Discipline specific workshops for undergraduates and postgraduates outside of class times were also conducted.

The TAFE Support program was based on semi-individualised concurrent support, and included online assistance and a focus on bridging programs. Support also involved support for TAFE teachers with preparation and marking of literacy and numeracy tests for students, and integration of service provision with some tutorials.

RMIT University: Strategic Statement. 2002

The agenda outlined by the Minister of Education and Training is closely aligned with the planning that RMIT has undertaken over the last eighteen months through a focus on pathways. This planning ensures leverage from RMIT’s dual sector position, encourages innovation, re-positions para-professional and technical training and nominates specialisation in a number of key areas supported by identified resources.

RMIT’s Strategic Plan and Direction to 2006 articulates goals to:
• strengthen pathways between schooling, VET and Higher Education;
• increase opportunities for young people;
• meet the demand for lifelong learning in the knowledge economy;
• put the innovation agenda into practice (eg, via Centres of Excellence);
• address areas of emerging demand, and areas of knowledge and service driven economic growth;
• provide student services and learning support tailored to new learning experiences for all student segments;
• continue to strengthen staff capability in order to improve the quality of student learning experiences.

The characteristics of the Pathways approach discussed in the following Statement include
  ➢ A New Focus on Clients
  ➢ Building Relationships
  ➢ Specialisations
  ➢ Innovation
A number of recent national reports\(^5\) documented a trend of increasing numbers of young people not in work or in education and found that many of those who did not complete Year 12 are destined to low paid marginal work and limited economic success in their lifetime.

In response, RMIT is focussing on redeveloping and repositioning its TAFE profile through a range of initiatives including:

- Contributing to building a knowledge-intensive economy and a cohesive, prosperous society by partnering with local communities and secondary schools to enable them to respond effectively to the needs of the groups and individuals within.
- Extending the customisation of training to embrace competencies in general education/employability, literacy and numeracy, research and business.
- Building clear and signposted pathways – articulation arrangements and nested qualifications.

The intention is to develop strategies and mechanisms that assist students to move freely between the domains and locate learning that meets their need at specific times during their lifelong learning cycle. Infrastructure services are being re-configured to provide support for students to develop competencies in employability and entrepreneurship; teachers to be capable of designing and delivering effective programs; and services that are targeted and responsive.

The Pathways Domain aims to facilitate the development of individuals as successful learners, good citizens and graduates who are well prepared and highly sought after in the workforce. It has a sustained focus on re-engaging youth through pre-vocational and apprenticeship pathways, supporting workers seeking to pursue careers, up-skill for advancement or re-enter the workforce through training pathways, and encouraging members of the community to gain skills through continuing education. Pathways has three sectors each with a specific segments and program portfolio.

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\(^5\) **National Report References:**


Student Feedback


The report described key findings from four years of data from the Student Feedback Top Ten reports and the 2002 Program Experience Survey (PES), University Experience Survey (UES), Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) and reports from the Faculties, Groups and central units. The following is a synopsis of findings that are relevant to student support provision:

Strengths
- Opportunities to make friends and network
- Diverse and friendly environment
- Library environment, resources and environment
- Students feeling personally safe on campus, being treated with respect

Opportunities for improvement
- Academic administration systems and associated activities
- Student centred culture
- Availability of appropriate learning resources
- Facilities maintenance and cleanliness

Improvements
- Library mostly or always has information needed for study - 6% increase in satisfaction since 2000
- Library mostly or always has services needed for study – 8.6% increase in satisfaction across the Faculties since 2000
- Computers easier to access - mostly or always easy to access 10% increase in satisfaction since 2000
- Accessible off campus program material increased by 9% since 2000, usefulness increased by 10%
- I.T. password management much improved

What students value
- The teacher student relationship, their enthusiasm and interest in students' learning
- Good access to and communication with academic and general staff
- Blend of theory and practice through practicals, fieldwork, placements
- Staff who have good links to industry

What students expect
- Flexible and effective administrative systems
- A clean and appropriate learning environment
- Access to up-to-date reliable equipment that is well maintained
- A good library collection including current books and journals
The Top Ten Student concerns and Positive Perceptions that may inform student perceptions of student support provision included:

- Making friends, developing networks
- Interaction with fellow students and networking opportunities
- Valuing the opportunity to meet and make new friends
- Diverse and friendly environment
- Library
- Teaching and learning experiences
- Variation in quality and effectiveness of planned learning experiences, teaching & tutoring skills and appropriateness
- Communities of learning and scholarship
- More staff/student and student/student networking & interaction
- More appropriate and available interaction opportunities and venues
- Consistent, accurate and timely information about programs
- Learning resources
- Student focus, communication and recognition of individual student needs
- Being able to talk to the right person and that person having the information or ability to obtain the information
- Website (navigation, finding things)
- Responsiveness and follow through (over-use of technology)
- Courtesy and student advocacy
- Facilities
- Student and campus life
- Focus point for each campus
- Provision of social and other community activities
- Reasons to stay at University
- Housing for rural and international students
- Online resources and learning materials

International students were more likely to believe that their programs helped them develop an international perspective compared to the total sample of students. They were also less likely to perceive that RMIT dealt fairly with complaints and is friendly and respectful to people from different backgrounds. They were less likely to report feeling personally safe at RMIT. They also strongly desired more contact with students from other programs and had concerns about adequate accommodation / housing.

Students who speak a language other than English also differed in their responses, in that they were more likely to believe that their programs helped them develop an international perspective. Like international students they were also less likely to perceive that RMIT dealt fairly with complaints, and were less likely to believe that they were treated with respect at RMIT, than other students in general. They more strongly reported that they desired more contact with students from other programs. They were also less likely to report they feel personally safe at RMIT than student in general.

This report reviewed a series of research reports produced or commissioned by RMIT Union, or conducted by RMIT University with input from RMIT Union:

- Sweeney Research RMIT Union Student Survey - November 2001
- RMIT University University Experience Survey (UES) 2000 (extract)
- RMIT University Student Feedback Top Ten Report 2001
- RMIT Union Arts, Culture & Community Services Department - Mature Age and Rural Students Project Report – December 2001
- RMIT Union Student Leisure Survey March 2001
- RMIT Union Bundoora Food Services Survey

Trends identified from the analysis included:

Time spent on campus

On average, students’ time could be categorized as:

- 71% course contact hours;
- 16% studying; and
- 13% other activities (64% of students meals/40% of students socialising).

On average full-time students spent only 3 hours a week on-campus participating in non-educational activities. The majority of students, and particularly those who were mature-age, had significant commitments external to the University.

It was suggested that the main barriers to participation and access to services was insufficient time to use services and a lack of information and publicity about what was available.

Importance of services

Students were largely unaware of many of the services available to them through RMIT Union. Only the following services had been used by a majority (>50%) of students:

- Food and drink vending machines
- Photocopying/binding service
- Student diary
- Cafeterias and food outlets
- Retail stationery outlets
- Student lounges

The majority of students also perceived these services as well as information centres to be important.

However there were significant discrepancies between importance and satisfaction ratings for the following services:

- Food outlets
- Lounge space
- Discount entertainment
- Retail services
The UES 2000 also found significant importance/satisfaction rating discrepancies across services for the Brunswick and Bundoora campuses.

Community on campus
Students raised ongoing concerns about the lack of lounge facilities, central meeting places and a community atmosphere, and anecdotal reports indicated a lack of satisfaction with the following basic services:

- Brunswick – lack of sporting facilities, poor pricing, variety and quality of cafeteria
- Bundoora – little sense of community, lack of informal meeting place such as a coffee shop
- Tivoli – no cafeteria and limited social/meeting spaces
- Brunswick, Bundoora and Fisherman’s Bend - improvements in food outlets,

Suggestions for new and improved services include a preference for relaxed food services and eating areas with a diversity of food choices, emphasising value, quality and variety.

According to the Student Feedback Top Ten Report 2001 students valued opportunities to make friends and network. They also valued and the diverse and friendly environment on campus including social activities providing them with a reason to remain on-campus. The Sweeney report found that:

- 73% of students felt that RMIT has a good university community
- 45% of students would like to feel more a part of this community (including 61% of international students)
- 68% of students felt a sense of belonging to their campus (those who don’t usually only come to University to study) and
- 45% of students felt a sense of belonging to the RMIT community (those who don’t experience a lack of contact with other students and campuses)

Specific student needs
Mature age, rural and international students requested a tailored orientation program, based on their specific needs as a group.

Mature age students requested the development and promotion of a seminar series targeted towards mature age students focussing on skill development, professional networking and social opportunities.

International students rated the importance of Sporting Facilities, Recreation Programs, Fitness Centre, Discount Entertainment and Theme Weeks higher than Local Students

Marketing and Publicity
- The report recommended that the feasibility of implementing an extended hours information and referral telephone line to promote RMIT Union services to those students unable to access services during normal business hours should be investigated.
In addition, the Sweeney report recommended that RMIT Union develop a broader ongoing signposting and communications strategy for promotion and marketing of RMIT Union Services to the University community.


RMIT initiated a program of on-going quantitative market research to assess public opinion, beliefs and perceptions regarding key performance issues. As a means of monitoring the strategy’s performance, on-going tracking was planned:

- Wave 1 - June 1997
- Wave 2 - October 1997
- Wave 3 - September 1998
- Wave 4 - October 1999
- Wave 5 - October 2000

The fifth wave survey was conducted by telephone with the total sample comprising 400 respondents. In 2000 RMIT targeted fee paying postgraduate research as the highest priority area. With the change in government support to universities together with the increasingly competitive market, RMIT wished to identify steps required to improve its performance in this area.

The main issues arising from discussions with RMIT full-fee paying postgraduate research students were:

**Motivated by Employment**
- The main reason most students chose to do postgraduate research was to improve employment prospects. Students wanted to further their careers as “researchers” or to become better qualified in a particular area. Most students believed obtaining a postgraduate qualification was the only way to move forward.

**Satisfaction with Projects**
- Students enjoyed doing practical projects and solving real problems that existed right now. Most seemed happy with the projects they were involved with RMIT. They described RMIT’s projects as practical, flexible and relevant to industry.

**Selecting a University**
- The reputation of the supervisor was a significant factor in choice of than the reputation of the university at postgraduate level.
- In most cases students went wherever they were offered a position and were happy with their supervisor.
- Some students did very little “shopping around” of other universities.
- Many students had completed their undergraduate degree and/or honours at RMIT and had been satisfied with their supervisors, subsequently deciding to stay at RMIT.
- Many students found that RMIT was the only university who specialised in their particular area or allowed them to pursue a specific topic or area of interest.
• Funding and the availability of scholarships was a significant factor in choice of university.

**International Students**
• One of the major differences between local and international students was the right to scholarships.
• There were no significant differences between the concerns of international students and other students in general.

Concerns included:

**Lack of Space and Poor Facilities**
• RMIT students thought they were disadvantaged by the lack of space and poor facilities at RMIT.
• Lack of office space
• Books, periodicals and journals in the library were not current and students frequently had to go to other universities’ libraries.
• Limited access to the internet from home.
• The network was often down or crashed frequently and students were cut off from the internet and email.
• Email addresses were students’ ID numbers instead of their names.
• Students felt these problems caused delays in their research and completion times.

**Lack of Funding**
• Students were dissatisfied with the situation regarding travel grants and funding for conferences. RMIT rarely provided funding for conferences, whereas students perceived that at other universities travel grants were easily obtained.
• Departments were very inflexible and slow in relation to obtaining funds for materials, equipment, etc that were vital to their research.

**No Collaboration**
• Lack of opportunities to work together teams with other research students.
• The atmosphere at RMIT is very secretive and protective.

**Lack of Support**
• Lack of technical staff to assist students in labs.
• Lack of contact / process for dealing with students’ problems.

**Move to Bundoora**
• Concerns regarding the move to Bundoora. Students were not told much about the move and were unsure about what was happening.
• Students suggested having an orientation day where they were taken to Bundoora and shown where they would be studying, etc.

**RMIT: A Research University?**
• Students questioned RMIT’s credibility as a research university and believed there was much progress required to fulfil RMIT’s research performance objectives.
• Students perceived RMIT as a business-orientated university mainly interested in making profit.
• better facilities, more technical staff and more experienced supervisors with good reputations were required to achieve performance objectives in research.

Improved Facilities and Student Support
RMIT’s lack of facilities and support services for students was perceived as a barrier to attracting high caliber students and need to be addressed.

Supervisors indicated that facilities were poor in most departments. Supervisors also believed the scattering of the buildings and departments prevented students from interacting and developing a collegiate atmosphere.

RMIT’s Position Has Not Changed
RMIT remained in third position behind Melbourne University and Monash on most of the key criteria. Compared to the Wave 4 study, RMIT’S performance amongst metropolitan respondents weakened very marginally in the following key criteria:

• Victoria’s leading university;
• most progressive and up with latest technology;
• best teaching and educational standards;
• being most practical and teaching skills that students can apply in the workplace;
• best reputation for breakthrough research; and
• best international profile;

In contrast, RMIT’S performance amongst metropolitan respondents improved slightly in the following five criteria:

• universities first mentioned unaided;
• total recall of universities;
• attracting overseas students;
• flexibility;
• being most in touch with industry needs.

RMIT generally performed better amongst metropolitan respondents than regional ones. Metropolitan respondents rated RMIT higher in all criteria except “Victoria’s leading university” and “international profile”.

The Internet
• Internet usage was significantly higher than the previous wave, suggesting the internet is becoming an increasingly popular tool to find information about courses.
• 46% of VCE students had used the internet to look up course information; again this is much higher than the previous wave.
• Only 3% of VCE students surveyed did not have access to the internet.
Respondents were split fairly evenly about whether they thought all Victorians had a fair chance of getting a place at university. An overwhelming number (95%) of respondents thought that accredited courses, such as apprenticeships, traineeships and VET represented a worthwhile path to a career. However, TAFE/VET courses had slightly less credibility and relevance amongst those actually doing them.

Further Study
- The majority of respondents currently studying intended to undertake some form of further study in the next twelve months (85% of metropolitan and 73% regional). As expected, a high proportion of VCE students planned to do more study. A significant percentage of older respondents who were currently studying also intended on doing more study in the next twelve months.
- Of those intending to undertake further study, most were planning to do a degree. Only a very small percentage of respondents (3%) intended on doing post graduate study. Short courses and certificates were more popular in rural areas than the city.

Student survey and focus groups were conducted September – October 2001 on the following topics:
- Security: awareness and perception of RMIT’s security staff
- Safety: travel, lockers, bike racks, personal experience on campus
- Semester breaks / Quiet times:

Findings indicated that a majority of students (with the exception of students from the Brunswick campus) were aware of security presence on campus. Most students indicated that they travel an average of 30 minutes to most RMIT campuses. Over 70% of students travelled to campus by car and felt safe with their mode of transport. Students were concerned that there were too few bike racks and no lockers to store travel gear.

Students felt most safe on campus during semester times when there were more people visibility on campus. While a majority of student owned mobile phones, a concerning finding was the lack of awareness of public phones available on campus. Only 38% of students surveyed indicated that RMIT had provided them with adequate information on their campus before commencing enrolment.

While International students indicated that cultural differences had led to difficulties associated with making friends, difficulties with English was not a highly rated problem among this cohort. A quality orientation program and providing students with opportunities to network with a diverse group of students were critical factors in promoting a sense of wellbeing for international students.

Postgraduate and Research Environment

This study aimed to investigate how research students and academic staff at RMIT experience the postgraduate research environment how the postgraduate research environment can be improved.

The study used qualitative methods consisting primarily of focus groups with a sample of research students from each Faculty at RMIT, and interviews with academics involved in the management of research degree programs within RMIT and across the ATN.

The findings demonstrated that considerable dissatisfaction exists amongst research students at RMIT with the quality of the research environment. The study found that the critical factor in determining the quality of the research student experience is the presence of a scholarly community, and that the key to improving the research environment is the level of enthusiasm and commitment of academic staff, and also to a lesser extent, students, toward research.

Students' comments indicated that a gulf exists for many between their expectations regarding a good research environment and their experience at RMIT. Research student aspirations regarding the research environment were summarised as follows:

- To be embraced as part of a vibrant, engaging and supportive culture of research (i.e.; passion for discovery, scholarship and ideas).
- Desire for respect: to be treated as a researcher (rather than just (sic) a student).
- To receive the necessary technical, library and financial support that will enable the successful realization of a research program.
- A physical environment that promotes the emergence of both spontaneous and formal opportunities for intellectual and social exchange between and amongst academics and students.

The study found that mode of enrolment and discipline were no guarantee as to the quality of the research student experience, but that students enrolled full time had higher expectations regarding the research environment than those enrolled part time.

Comments from academic staff indicated that they shared many of the concerns and aspirations of research students. It was also evident that impediments to academic staff undertaking research and engaging in a scholarly community needed to be addressed in tandem with issues associated with the postgraduate research environment.

The report offered recommendations for improving the research learning environment through:

- Improving the quality of the research cultures or communities experienced by research students at RMIT through review of practice in departments;
• Adopting a comprehensive approach to the treatment of research within departments, being clear, for example, of the nature of the research student experience that is being offered
• Developing formal opportunities for research students to attend seminars and present work in the presence of other students and academics.
• Review the library to ascertain whether it is being sufficiently resourced to meet the special needs of research students.
• ensure that laboratories are sufficiently serviced by experienced staff and that if a students' research is funded by an external body that it does not cause undue stress on the student or undermine the content and outcomes of their research.
• Conduct a review within departments or programs into the impact that impediments on staff undertaking research have on the research environment experienced by students.

Graduate Outcomes and Alumni

RMIT (December 2001). International Career Index Email Survey, RMIT: DSRD

The outcomes of previous International Career Index Surveys had found that RMIT Alumni are favorably disposed to their alma mater, with 94% in 1999 and 93.9% in 2000 indicating that they wanted to maintain a relationship with RMIT University.

93.9% of respondents also welcomed follow up contact from RMIT6 with 64.6% of both domestic and international alumni preferring to be contacted via e-mail to phone and mail.

Tracked career information on Alumni identified the following characteristics:
• Significant majority of graduates were in paid work, were wage or salary earners, were working full-time (35 hours or more a week), were in permanent/ongoing employment and were working in a position requiring a Bachelor Degree or Higher Qualification
• Over 70% of graduates were earning more than $36,400
• Almost 50% of respondents had already completed a Bachelor Degree - 75.2% at RMIT.
• 44.5% were enrolled in a postgraduate course
• 43.5% were enrolled in a postgraduate course at RMIT
• 47.8% of respondents cited professional development reasons as their main motivation to undertake postgraduate study
• 34.8% of respondents felt that their postgraduate qualification would help them to do their current job more effectively

The top four industry groups were Health, education and other community services, Finance, property and business services, Communication services and Manufacturing.
The top four occupational groups were Other Business Professionals, Painters, Sculptors,

Related Professionals, Sales & Marketing Managers and General Medical Practitioners. Findings indicated that 75% of respondents are currently employed in an industry or occupation they would like to pursue a career in, and that 82.7% of respondents are currently employed in a position that requires a Bachelor Degree or Higher Qualification.

**Postgraduate Study**

- 84% of graduates reported they would consider postgraduate study at RMIT claiming they enjoyed previous studies here.
- 39.1% of respondents gave their main reason for discontinuing postgraduate study as not having enough time
- 21.7% cited financial difficulties as reason for withdrawing from postgraduate study
- 55% cited not having enough time as a reason for not undertaking postgraduate study at all
- 82% believed they did not need it to further their current career
- 97% claimed they did not have the qualifications to undertake postgraduate study
- 34.9% of respondents were keen to receive information about developing their business in Victoria.

**Alumni Office, (May 2001). 5 Year Out Report, RMIT.**

In May 2001, focus groups were conducted with graduates five years after completion of their RMIT qualification to elicit a needs analysis as well as their perceptions of the quality and benefits of their studies at RMIT. It was proposed that this information would be used as background to guide the development of further research.

The following is a summary of findings from the report:

**Reasons / Benefits of choosing to study at RMIT:**

- MBA students and part timers found the location and flexible delivery convenient.
- Perceived RMIT’s reputation as a practical university
- Specialisation for engineering courses were beneficial
- Flexibility for transferring credits and exemptions for previous study were attractive

**Career implications**

- MBA graduates felt that their qualification rather than the university advanced their careers
- MBA graduates focussed on the operational benefits (convenience and flexible delivery) while Business and Engineering graduates focussed on the educational experience (public speaking, presentation and smaller classes plus practical approach)
• The RMIT experience helped graduates build confidence, research and time management skills
• Engineering graduates felt that due to the level of specialisation of the course they have not been well equipped to branch away to other industries
• MBA graduates felt that the syndicate groups should be likened to project management and members should not be allowed to quit
• Business graduates felt that some subjects were not practical or relevant to the working industry
• Engineering graduates felt that they lacked basic business skills and wanted a more rounded education

A few graduates have set up or are in the process of setting up their own companies or businesses.