

School to uni: What's the difference?

Writing Centre Learning Guide

High school and university vary in a number of ways. Differences include the ways in which subjects are organised and delivered, expectations that you will work independently, a greater reading load, and more sophisticated research requirements.

Introduction

Making the transition from a controlled learning environment such as high school to a university learning environment, with its focus on self-responsibility, can be a big challenge. It is definitely not the case of 'more of the same'! Breaking down the process into parts will help you to make sense of what you need to recognise and to implement.

Classes

In High School ...

- Class size is usually less than 30 students and normally involves face-to-face classroom-based teaching.
- Your timetable is fixed by the school.

At University ...

- Classes (lectures) can be enormous with over 200+ students.
 - Classes can take a variety of formats such as lectures, tutorials and/or lab work.
 - Contact hours vary from course to course.
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Subjects

In High School ...

- Content reflects a structured textbook-focused curriculum.
- Teachers will tell you what the most important information and ideas are.
- There is a limited range of elective subjects.

At University ...

- Content is more dynamic and will go beyond an assigned textbook.
 - There is a broader range of electives beyond your core courses.
 - You have greater responsibility for extracting the main information and ideas by yourself.
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Time Management

In High School ...

- Your study schedule is partly arranged and managed for you.

At University ...

- You are solely responsible for arranging and managing your own study schedule.
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Learning Environment

In High School ...

- Teachers will give detailed information about homework and expected out-of-class learning activities.
- Teachers will issue reminders about assignment due dates.
- Your learning time is mostly taken up by lessons.
- Your progress is regularly monitored by your teachers and formalised in end-of-term reports to parents.

At University ...

- Formal teaching such as lectures, tutorials and lab work takes up less of your learning time.
 - There are no formal end-of-semester reports for parents.
 - You are expected to know your course deadlines.
 - You are treated as an adult who is fully responsible for their own learning and progress.
 - You are expected to self-direct your own study. A good ratio is 1:3. That is, for every timetabled hour, you should do 3 hours of self-directed study.
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Responsibilities

In High School ...

- Less freedom: you must attend classes.
- The school is responsible for checking-up on your attendance.

At University ...

- Lecturers will not normally chase non-attendeess.
 - More choice: you can skip class. The responsibility is yours. (Note: attendance can be an assessable component of some courses).
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Contact

In High School ...

- Teaching staff know your name.
- Teaching staff are available to discuss your progress with you and your parents.

At University ...

- Teaching staff are not readily available, so you will need to initiate consultations with them.
 - Laws prevent teaching staff from disclosing information about your progress to your parents.
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Feedback

In High School ...

- Feedback may be a part of your assignment drafting process (formative feedback).
- You often receive frequent feedback from your teachers without having to request it.

At University ...

- Feedback can be infrequent.
 - Feedback is often given only after the final assignment is submitted (summative feedback).
 - Marking criteria can vary from course to course.
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Preparing Assignments

In High School ...

- Assignments tend to be shorter and more frequent.
- Teachers might ask for your drafts.
- Your reproduction of core 'knowledge' is valued, with limited consideration of alternative perspectives.

At University ...

- Assignments tend to be longer and less frequent.
 - You are expected to critically engage with the subject matter, but there is recognition that you will improve with greater practise.
 - Your assignment schedule is frequently given out in advance for the whole semester.
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Assessment

In High School ...

- Frequently, there is a smaller range of assessment types.
- Teachers follow the same grading scales.

At University ...

- Grading scales can vary between faculties, programs and courses.
 - There are more varied assessment types and this can include short and long-term assessment.
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Research Requirements

In High School ...

- Exact readings are normally determined by your teachers, usually based around set textbooks.
- Teachers distribute photocopies.
- Your research is normally based on a narrow range of 'general' sources such as internet search engines and generic magazines or newspapers articles.

At University ...

- You are expected to research utilising a wide range of purely academic sources only, such as electronic databases and journals.
 - You may receive long reading lists and need to purchase different books for different courses.
 - You make your own photocopies that are normally at your own expense.
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Exams

In High School ...

- Final school exams are marked externally.
- Normally, exams are the closed-book type.

At University ...

- Exams are marked internally.
 - Exams may include open-book and take-home types.
 - Supplementary exams can be taken in certain cases.
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Referencing

In High School ...

- You are normally required to provide a final reference list, rather than indicating references within your text to show where each piece of information was sourced from.

At University ...

- You are expected to be 100% accurate in both in-text and final referencing techniques, as appropriate use of referencing is highly valued in terms of substantiating your academic work and avoiding plagiarism.
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Tips to help you bridge the gap between school and university

- Do not assume that high marks at school equates to high marks at university. The marking criteria can require different levels of understanding and synthesis.
- Learn how to use the library properly, as Wikipedia is often frowned on as a resource.
- Learn to prioritise your studies, otherwise time management issues could become problematic for you.
- Read your course guides and MyUni information carefully. Your course coordinators, lecturers and tutors will assume that you have done this.
- Recognise that you can change things, but you will need to be proactive and not wait for others to offer help or support.
- Regular exercise and good nutrition are basic requirements for success in your studies.
- Remember that learning is more open-ended in a university context and that your independence in the learning environment is highly valued.
- Studying at university is not like a 9.00 am-5.00 pm job, so you will need to be flexible in your study patterns.
- Studying for hours-on-end without breaks is not smart. Take time out to recharge your batteries.
- You are entering a different learning environment and the transition process can take time, so be patient with yourself.

Useful Resources

There are many other resources, both local and international, which give valuable information about the issue of making the transition from a school to a university environment. Here are some of them.

This website from the University of NSW gives some useful information about transitional issues between school and university. Make sure you take the quiz!

First Steps: A beginner's guide to university

- <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/firststeps/differ.html>

This Deakin University website follows a tabular model and gives some detailed distinctions between school and university.

From secondary school to university

- <http://www.deakin.edu.au/students/study-support/new-students/secondary-school>

Watch this YouTube video (3.13 mins) which has University of Birmingham (England) students talking about a wide range of differences they have found between school and university.

Differences between school and the University of Birmingham

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tv2fWhaEY1Q>