

Empowering Students for Global Learning: Transitioning from High School to University

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Students today are more supported than before, and yet they are less prepared for independence.
How do we bridge that gap ?

PRESENTATION AGENDA

01

Speaker
Introduction

02

What research tells us about
transitions

03

From the High School and University
Perspectives

04

Feedback from Students and Parents

05

Final Reflections

JUNITA DEVI SOCKALINGAM

Head, Higher Education & Careers, ACS International, Singapore



MY EXPERIENCE

14 years in college counselling, with 13 years across a highly selective local Singapore school and an international school serving a 50/50 Singaporean-international student population



MY DAILY ROLES

Guide students and families through university and career planning, assisting with applications, course selection, decision-making, IGCSE and IB subject selection. Head the department and the job shadowing program with 130 partners.



ABOUT ME

Mum to my 5-year-old son Arjunah and caring for my 75-year-old dad

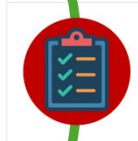
CARMAN K.M. WONG-CHAN

Assistant Director, World Bachelor in Business, HKUST Business School



MY EXPERIENCE

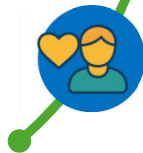
13+ years in higher education, with majority of time dedicated to a selective joint bachelor program “World Bachelor in Business (WBB)”



MY DAILY ROLES

Everything related to WBB – recruitment & admission, student support with both academic and career advising, alumni engagement, etc

> **My main role is to ensure the students succeed in the program**



ABOUT ME

Mom of two boys, Tate (4 years old) and Jude (18 months)

ACADEMIC RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT **STUDENTS DO STRUGGLE WITH TRANSITION** AND SO **SUPPORT FOR TRANSITION IS VERY IMPORTANT.**

Princeton University: Transition from high school to college

- Students are unprepared for postsecondary coursework for different reasons: differences between what high school teaches and what colleges expects, non-curricular variables like peer influences, parental expectations, and conditions that encourage academic study
- Different interventions to improve college readiness

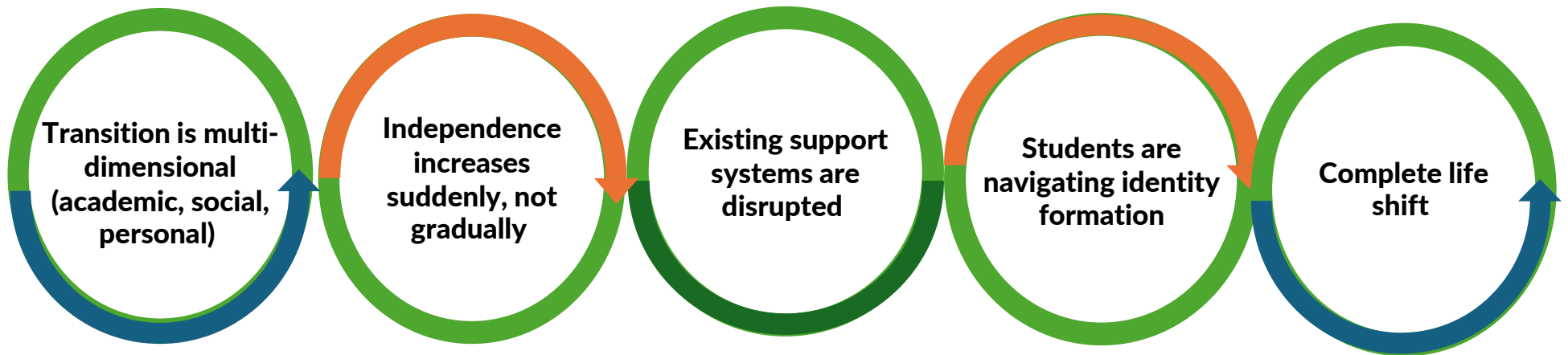
Deakin University: The lived experience of TCK transitioning into uni life in Australia.

- 8 of 12 participants received preparation seminars about university life, course selection, and Western society when attending an international school > All participants agreed that even though they prepared, they were still unaware of what specific transition issues they would face upon arrival in Australia.

Edinburgh Napier University: Intl student's unique challenges – why understanding intl transitions to higher education matters

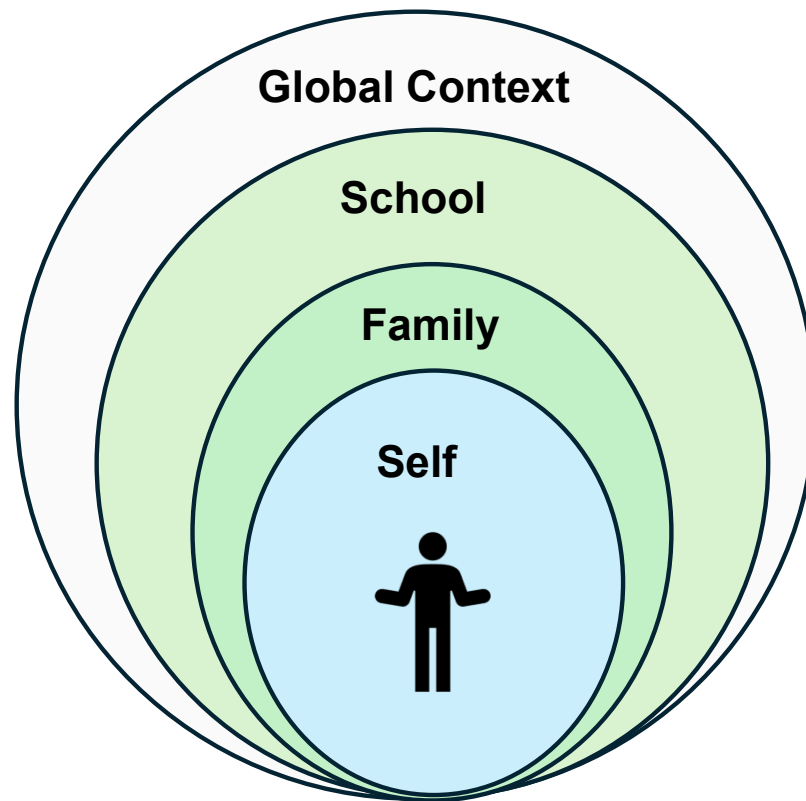
- Many students find the first weeks at a new institution challenging, but international students have a particular tough time.
- Culture shock may result in degradation of physical, social and mental health. In the case of international students, the dissonance extends to include academic discourse divergence and the resulting pressure of academic failure.

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT TRANSITION



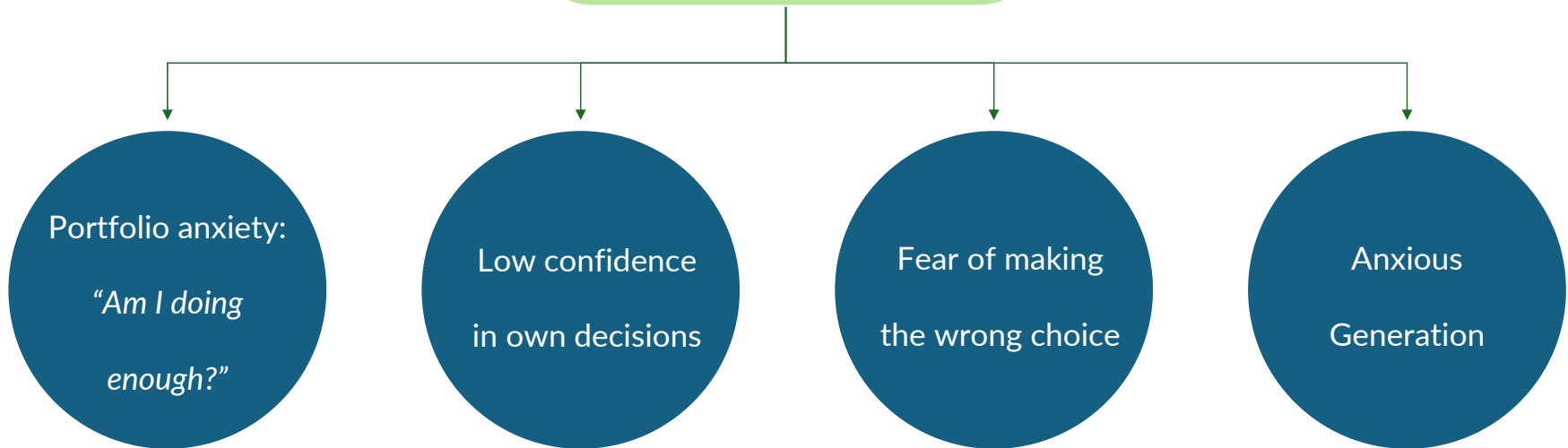
4 SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

Students are shaped by four overlapping spheres:





Self (Student Experience)



External validation → Internal doubt



THEN



Scholarly Discussion



NOW



Internships, Research at Undergrad

Family (Parent & Culture)

Desire for
certainty and
clear pathways

High
involvement =
care and
responsibility

Reliance
on
guidance,
agents,
translation

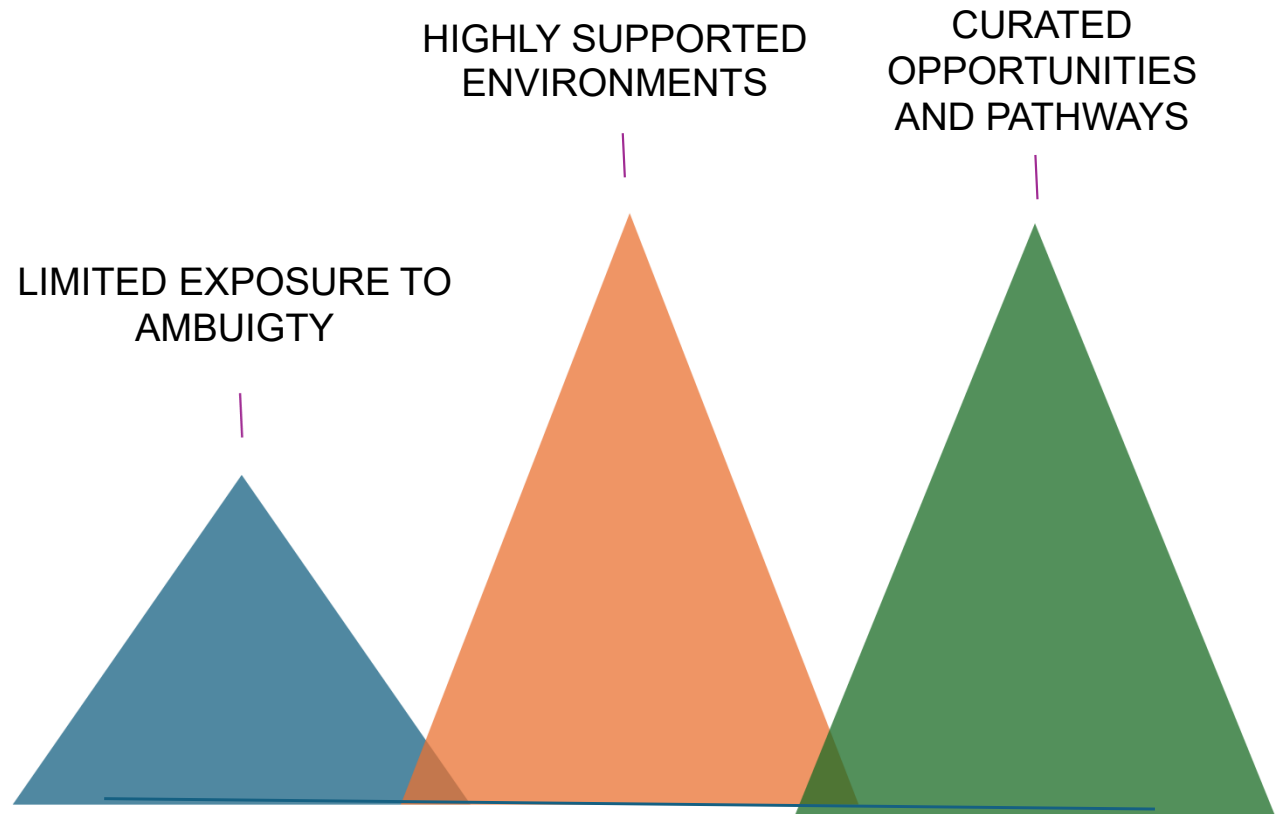
Familiarity –
university,
course,
careers

Language and
3rd Party
Assistance

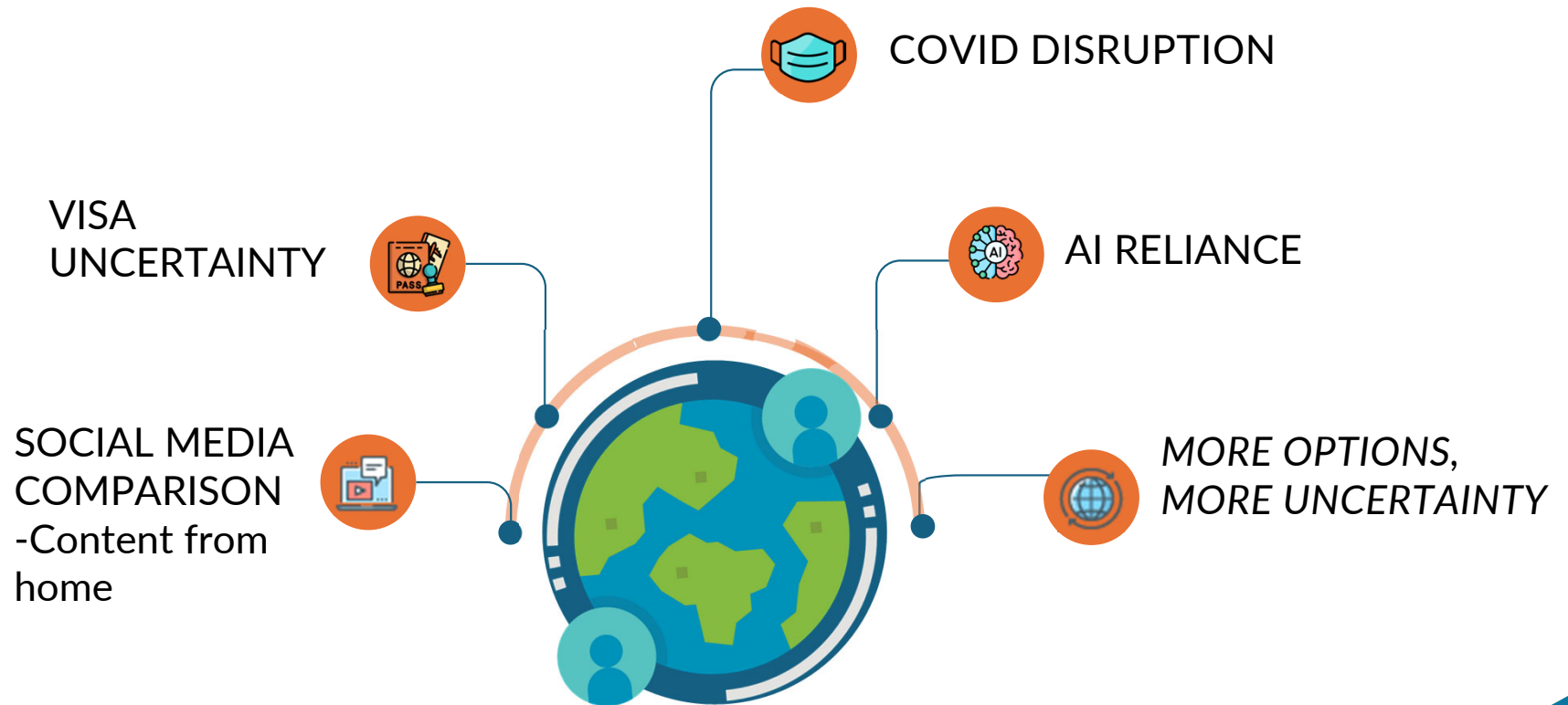
Guilt and
Pressure



School (Systems & Structures)



GLOBAL CONTEXT





menti.com
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WHAT ARE YOU NOTICING ?

**WHAT HAS CHANGED IN YOUR
CONTEXT?**

**WHAT ARE STUDENTS BETTER AT
TODAY?**

**WHAT ARE THEY LESS PREPARED
FOR?**

What are you noticing?

Students are more instrumental in their choices

Students are more scared of making decisions.

More group think

Students applying to unis at multiple countries

Students aren't prepared for consequences at university, whether for behavior or academic performance

Paradox of choice - real feel of making the 'right' decision.

Less self-reliant

Students applying to multiple countries

What are you noticing?

Less in empathy

Students going from the top of their school to being one of many and struggling

Students considering more destinations in Asia

Families will pay lip service to the importance of employability, soft skills, internships etc but will choose the higher ranked university over the one able to offer those things better every time

No interest in making their own choices

More anxiety, or maybe just more students saying they are anxious. It is not the same thing ;-)

The college offer season prolonged, and more anxiety with waiting ...

Many students not ready to make their own decisions.

What are you noticing?

Difficulty with personal interactions

The focus on 'pre professional' in terms of prioritising, clubs, internships, opportunities instead of the opportunity of learning

Some students don't read carefully when applying to universities :(

I wonder if the current international education standards and college readiness frameworks are really helpful for students' transition to college education

Weaker/ less developed social skills

Students feel there is nothing they can rely on - they can't imagine what their future world will be.

Students seem confused

Students follow parents and are afraid to advocate for their choices

What are you noticing?

Students are very pragmatic, not idealistic

Parents are extra involved and think that they know the best, but it's all word of mouth, and wrong info.

Following their peers choices

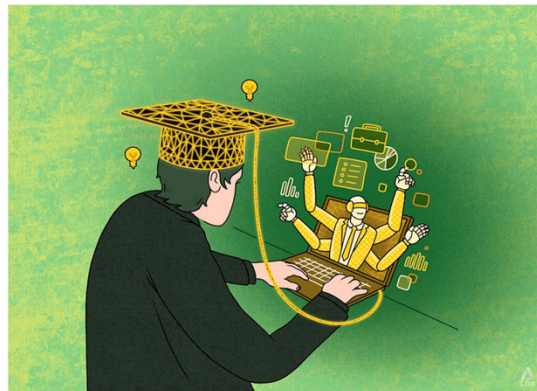
Students expecting reminders
Students asking about AI proof majors
Students wanting to work alone indoors

FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE



BIG READ AI is not wiping out all entry-level jobs, but it's changing the game and fresh jobseekers need to level up

Experts say AI isn't wiping out all junior roles, but it's forcing fresh grads to level up and prove the one thing machines still can't replace: human judgment.



While AI is not wiping out entry-level jobs across the board, its impact is most visible in routine roles. (Illustration: CNA/Nurjannah Suhaimi)

Amanda Yeap
07 Nov 2025 09:30PM
(Updated: 10 Nov 2025 10:53AM)
Social sharing icons for WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Messenger, Email, and LinkedIn.
+ Set CNA as your preferred source on Google

Students are more anxious in an increasingly uncertain world (AI, economy, geopolitics, careers)

Strong push for certainty → “just tell me the right choice/what portfolio I need to build”. Student is then unequipped to handle demands and falls in a **"certainty trap"**

Rise of structured, supported pathways (tuition culture, agents, curated activities, research programs) Paid internships via an agent. Esp if they are away from home and have no connections in their place of high school

University framed as ROI (rankings "rankings trap", majors, employability) less on fit and lesser prepared for it

What is "enough" ? - there is a push for more and more..





WHAT ARE STUDENTS
LEAVING SCHOOL
WITHOUT THAT
UNIVERSITY EXPECTS
THEM TO HAVE?

What are students leaving school without that university expects them to have?



FROM THE UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVES

LESS CONFIDENT

Always hoping for direct answers or guidance from the advisors

LESS INDEPENDENT

More challenges with self-regulation and with time management independently

INCREASED ANXIETY

Increased anxiety surrounding the university transition, not just about academic rigor, but broader sense of apprehension

THEY ARE LOOKING FOR CERTAINTY!

WHEN THEY ARE AT HIGH SCHOOL...

The New York Times

Inside the Pricey, Totally Legal World of College Consultants

Share full article



485

Forbes

LEADERSHIP > EDUCATION

How The Explosion Of Private Consultants Has Changed The College Admissions Landscape

By Christopher Rim, Contributor. © As the CEO of Command Education, I write ab...

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Published May 02, 2025, 06:30am EDT



WHEN THEY ARE AT UNIVERSITY...

Bloomberg's post



Bloomberg
10 August 2024 ·

Chinese students are increasingly turning to career coaching services, paying as much as \$50,000 to land a coveted finance job. But as the employment market sours and Wall Street firms cut back on hiring in the country, many are left empty-handed.



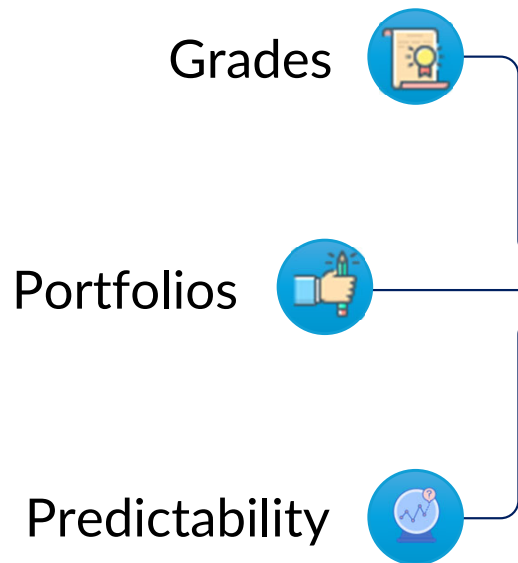
bloomberg.com

Chinese Students Are Paying Agents \$50,000 for Finance Jobs as Market Sours

Chinese students are increasingly turning to career coaching services, paying as much as \$50,000 ...

THE GAP

WHAT HIGH SCHOOL OPTIMIZES FOR:



WHAT UNIVERSITY REQUIRES:



“Admission ≠ Adaptation”



"College applications are often one of the most supported process in a student's life, yet immediately followed by the least supported environments a student has ever faced."

PRIMARY ADAPTATION CHALLENGES

Transitioning to university is a complex process involving significant shifts in academic, social, and personal responsibilities.



ACADEMIC RIGOR & AUTONOMY

Independent learning models, intensive course schedules without constant supervision



SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT & BELONGING

New peer network in large campus environments, cultural differences



FINANCIAL PRESSURES & BUDGETING

Managing personal finances, balancing part-time jobs and study



MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Maintaining emotional stability while navigating the loss of familiar support systems

HOW TO IMPROVE COLLEGE READINESS?



ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Taking college classes (dual enrollment in US), college admission tests (SAT/ACT/Eng proficiency test)



INFO ABOUT COLLEGE

Info about local cultures, degree options, campus resources, academic expectations, and support services



SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Access to counseling and support networks to manage stress and build confidence.



DEVELOPMENT OF HABITS OF MIND

Organization skills, anticipation, persistence, resilience



BUDDY SYSTEM

Pairing with senior peers to provide guidance and answer questions to ease the transition



ORIENTATION SESSIONS

Introductory programs that familiarize students with campus life and academic systems



Transition Talks by High Schools

WHAT

- University will feel very different (scheduling, track your deadlines etc).
- Use what's available - no one will tell you to (gym, counselling etc).
- Don't just attend events- engage meaningfully (career fairs, talks, linkedin etc).
- It's not just about GPA anymore
- International students in your school may have already experienced these transitions and can offer valuable insights to their peers

HOW

- Hypothetical Scenario sharing – it's your first day of school, what will you wear, how do you get to class
- In pairs – discuss scenarios and suggest outcomes
- Skills Focused Workshop – Time Management, Self Awareness, Intercultural competence, managing stress



WHAT IS ONE THING
THAT IS WORKING IN
YOUR SCHOOL OR
UNIVERSITY?

What is one thing that is working in your school or university?

Panels involving recent alumni

Alumni networking before leaving to uni.

Discussion on cultural intelligence before heading off

High quality welcome week

Pre-departure orientation

Increasing number of students taking gap years

We offer a series of webinars for international student before their arrival.

Students plan a week's budgeting for whichever university/city they intend to enrol at

What is one thing that is working in your school or university?

Working through their failures

Connecting students with Alumni

Pre-departure briefings

HKUST came a gave a fantastic talk about students managing their finances...

Career discovery workshops

Peer support, introduction week, predeparture events

More autonomy in the application process and more alumni input.

Student involvement club and organisations

What is one thing that is working in your school or university?

Buddy system

We have life skills workshops in homebase and life after high school topics in counselling class.

Full orientation week

Alumni panels, "Adulting 101" workshops

Mental health settings where students can just stop in to chat

We have a lot of resources for first gen students that can benefit new international student transitions.

I have lunch with the student I'm closer to? Is that counted? It helps assure them.

Pre departure orientation

What is one thing that is working in your school or university?

Support and create chances for students to get internship

Moving Onwards workshop before graduation
Exit interview 1:1 meeting with counsellor before graduation
Internship program the summer before with workshops on professional behavior

Orientation week

University life shared by university staff to our senior students.

Alumni sharing sessions:
top tips sessions

NOW...

LET'S HEAR FROM THE **STUDENTS!**

Insights from
30+ WBB students
from Asia, Americas,
and Europe

ABOUT WBB

YEAR
1



University of Southern
California, USA

YEAR
2



The Hong Kong Uni of
Science and Technology,
Hong Kong, China

YEAR
3



Bocconi University, Italy

YEAR
4



Any of the three
partner schools



- Around 40-45 students in each WBB cohort
- Students are treated as full-time students at each school (not exchange students)
- Highly selective process with holistic admission
- Extremely diverse cohorts with about 1/3 from Asia, 1/3 from Americas, and 1/3 from Europe

TRENDS NOTICING AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Since 2014, we asked WBB students to complete the same set of student experience survey after Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3 to rate their student experience. The data has shown:



PROACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Recurring theme of "joining student societies" and "communicating with locals"



HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Successful transition includes both social integration and management of academic responsibility



THE "LOCAL" ASPECT

Navigating a new culture, language (potentially), and social norms

FIRSTHAND INSIGHTS FROM THE STUDENTS...

30 WBB students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds share their transition experience:

Q1

Looking back, what was one thing that significantly helped you feel more settled and prepared as you started university?

Q2

What skills or knowledge do you wish your high school had provided more of to better prepare you for university life and your unique international experience?

Q3

What is one specific action you believe universities, based on your transition experience across the globe, could take to better support students during their initial transition, especially those from diverse international backgrounds?

Q4

What is one piece of practical advice you would give an incoming freshman to ease their transition across different countries?



Photo source: US Career Institute

Q1: Looking back, what was one thing that significantly helped you feel more settled and prepared as you started university?

Theme 1 (Overwhelmingly Dominant):

Peer Connection Before Day 1

This is the **single strongest theme** across the responses.

Students repeatedly mention:

- Group chats (Snapchat, WhatsApp, cohort chats)
- Meeting peers *before arrival*
- Orientation / Welcome Week activities
- Knowing *just one or two people* beforehand
- Alumni and older-student networks

Representative patterns:

- “Knowing people before day 1”
- “Group chats before arriving”
- “Orientation programs made it exciting rather than overwhelming”
- “Having someone to fall back on”



Students did not say *systems* helped most. They said **people** helped most – especially *self-initiated or student-created networks*.

Q1: Looking back, what was one thing that significantly helped you feel more settled and prepared as you started university?

Theme 2: Self-Management Habits (Especially Routines & Planning)

Several students explicitly credited:

- Planners
- Routines
- Goal-setting
- Time management systems they built themselves

Notably:

- These habits were self-created, not imposed
- They provided emotional grounding amid change

Students who felt settled didn't wait for reminders — they built their own systems **independently.**

Q1: Looking back, what was one thing that significantly helped you feel more settled and prepared as you started university?

Theme 3: Anchored Discomfort as a Source of Growth

Some of the most reflective responses highlight a balance between challenge and continuity:

- “There was nothing that helped – the challenge itself helped”
- Prior experiences of change (switching schools, studying abroad)
- Repeatedly making new friends from scratch
- Maintaining familiar activities, routines, or identities as a grounding force while exploring new environments

Discomfort was formative – and most effective when **paired with something familiar.**

Q2: What skills or knowledge do you wish your high school had provided more of to better prepare you for university life and your unique international experience?

Theme 1 (Very Strong): Cultural & International Readiness

Repeated examples:

- Lack of true cultural knowledge
- Surface-level stereotypes
- Shock moving to LA / Hong Kong / Italy
- No preparation for living abroad emotionally or practically

“International exposure” was not just academic — it was daily life competence.

Q2: What skills or knowledge do you wish your high school had provided more of to better prepare you for university life and your unique international experience?

Theme 2: Communication, Networking & Soft Skills

Repeated mentions:

- Small talk
- Networking
- Public speaking
- Presentations
- Knowing how to present oneself competitively

Students felt academically capable but **socially undertrained** for university environments.

Q2: What skills or knowledge do you wish your high school had provided more of to better prepare you for university life and your unique international experience?

Theme 3: Time Management & Self-Discipline

Many students explicitly named:

- Time management
- Self-discipline
- Compressed workloads
- No second chances

Theme 4: Decision-Making & Navigation for Academic Systems

Students wished they had known:

- You build your own timetable
- You may not get the classes you want
- You must advocate for yourself
- Systems are confusing and not explained

Theme 5: Learning How to Learn Independently

Some students noted:

- Difficulty adapting study methods
- Larger lectures
- Passive learning formats
- Need to relearn how to learn

Q2: What skills or knowledge do you wish your high school had provided more of to better prepare you for university life and your unique international experience?

Students struggled not because university content was harder, but because **responsibility shifted fully to them** — for managing time, navigating systems, learning effectively, and advocating for themselves — often for the first time.

Q3: What is one specific action you believe universities, based on your transition experience across the globe, could take to better support students during their initial transition, especially those from diverse international backgrounds?

Theme 1 (Very Strong):

Peer-Based Support > Centralized Information

Students consistently said:

- One-off presentations are overwhelming
- Emails are ignored or forgotten
- What actually helps is a human who's done it before

The most repeated suggestion:

- Peer mentorship / Buddy systems
- Student ambassadors
- Older students explaining "how things really work"

Representative ideas:

- Buddy systems with local or upper-year students
- National / cultural societies highlighted early
- Easier access to someone "safe" to ask "stupid" questions
- Student-created group chats

Universities Matter —
But peer networks
matter more than any
system. The most
effective support
systems were
designed **by students,**
for students.

Q3: What is one specific action you believe universities, based on your transition experience across the globe, could take to better support students during their initial transition, especially those from diverse international backgrounds?

Theme 2: Too Much Information at Once = No Information at All

Students repeatedly said:

- Orientation info dumps were overwhelming
- One Zoom before college starts was not enough

What they want:

- Staggered explanations & repeated checkpoints
- “Just-in-time” guidance

Theme 3: Human Warmth and Psychological Safety

One of the most emotionally charged responses:

- Feeling shut down by passive-aggressive responses
- Hesitating to ask for help after mistakes

Students want:

- Approachability
- Non-judgmental support
- Explicit permission to not “already know”

Universities confuse availability of information with understanding. Students disengage not because support is absent – but because it feels unsafe or difficult to access.

Q4: What is one piece of practical advice you would give an incoming freshman to ease their transition across different countries?

Theme 1 (Overwhelmingly Dominant): Openness, Adaptability, and Acceptance of Discomfort

This is by far the most repeated message.

Students say:

- “Be open-minded”
- “Forget what you think you know”
- “Say yes”
- “Embrace discomfort”
- “Accept things will be hard”

Yet, several responses strike an **important balance**:

- But don’t abandon your values or identity

Students don’t say “it will be easy.” They say “**expect difficulty — and don’t interpret it as failure.**” They don’t want them to be protected, they ask them to **be prepared.**

Q4: What is one piece of practical advice you would give an incoming freshman to ease their transition across different countries?



Be open-minded. *Forget everything you thought you knew.* Attempt to make friends with people from diverse backgrounds.



Your culture will always be part of who you are (you are unique!), but moving to a new country will definitely expose you to things that most people will never experience in their lives. Take advantage of it. Say yes to opportunities!



Prioritise building a small, close social circle quickly as those connections will be your anchor, and approach every cultural difference with curiosity rather than anxiety.



I would tell them it would be hard. I think *knowing that before starting is really important, as it allows you to mentally prepare and not be taken off guard during hard times.* I would tell them that there are going to be a lot of cultural changes, and therefore I would advise them to give the new place a blank slate and really go into it without any preconceptions.



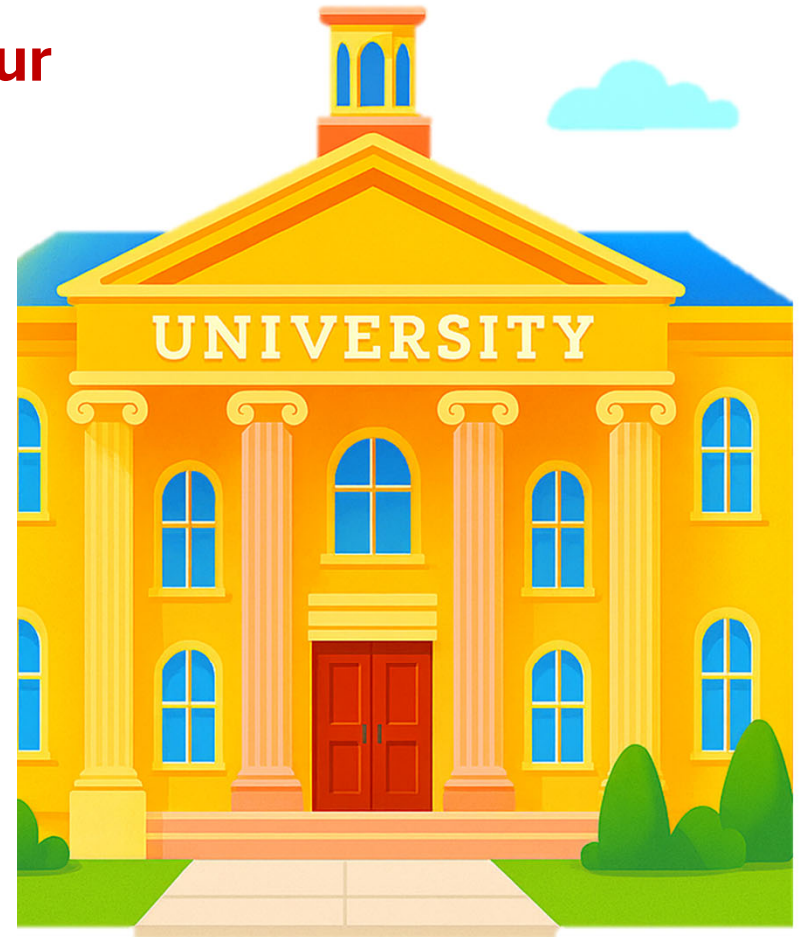
Practical advice from someone with worrywart parents, figure out in advance when you first get there all of your essentials just in case you need them so you don't struggle later on when you need it. This can be simple things like figuring out the public transit system, setting up common payment systems, or locating the nearest ER/hospital.

HOW ABOUT THE PARENTS?

First, let's hear from
parents of **university**
students...

Q1: Looking back, what do you wish your child had done better?/prepared for?

- Managing time and workload **independently**
- **Communicating** with Professors and Adults
- We did not know we needed to apply for **hostel** at the same time
- The XXXX **university culture**
- **Community involvement** outside of school



Q2: What advice would you give to parents whose children are about to start university?

- ☞ To be aware of your own boundaries and make sure others respect them.
- ☞ To be aware of peer pressure and how to counter that.
- ☞ To be better prepared to live overseas alone and that sleep for them is very important.
- ☞ Other issues will crop up like workplace issues, housemates, budgeting etc
- ☞ Start planning early (life skills, finance etc), have constant conversations with your child.
- ☞ Connect with current undergrads before leaving.



HOW ABOUT THE PARENTS?

Next, let's hear from
parents of **high**
school students...

Q1: What are your biggest concerns about your child going to university?



- Funding
- Being able to get in
- Choosing a course they are happy with
- Get the score I want
- Her appetite and diet - maintain a good healthy diet and lifestyle
- Meet university application deadlines and get required documents ready
- Adapting to a new environment, social structure and coping with coursework
- Living abroad alone
- Safety
- I don't know if I should pay for external advising or school support is sufficient

Q2: What would help you feel more confident in your child's transition to university?

- Support from school to choose university
- Regular feedback from school
- A job near them
- Understanding the Courses and University
- Detailed timeline
- She can do it
- His awareness of options available
- Choosing a course to thrive in
- Being in a new place but having some familiar people around. E.g. friends/family

"As a parent without any experience with the IB program, I have no idea how much support I should be providing."



Final Reflection

If we continue preparing students to get in...

but not to live independently...

👉 we are only solving half the problem



**IN PAIRS OR TRIOS,
DISCUSS:**
WHAT IS **ONE** THING
YOU WILL CHANGE
IN YOUR PRACTICE
TOMORROW?

A University Lecturer's Perspective

1. Students Are Not Unwilling—They Are Overloaded

- Too many cognitive demands at once

https://www.psychologytoday.com/sg/blog/risking-it/202211/students-need-more-support-thats-not-coddling?utm_source=chatgpt.com

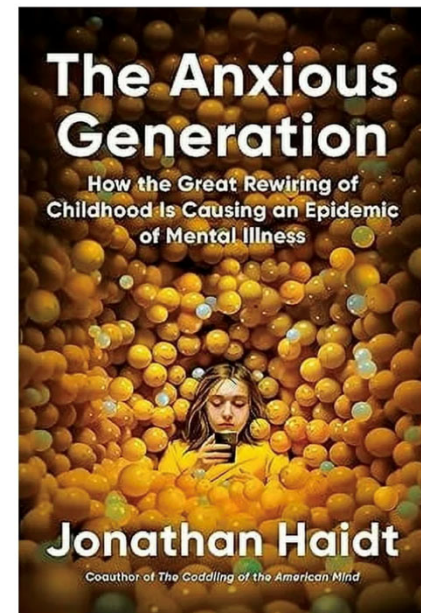
2. The World Has Changed (Attention, Environment, Expectations)

- Shorter attention spans, Immediate gratification culture
- More distractions, more mental load

3. Reducing Load ≠ Lowering Standards

- Teacher reduced complexity, not expectations -> Students actually performed *better*
- “Meet Students Where They Are”
- Small wins → confidence → progress

- Research like Jonathan Haidt’s highlights that students today have had fewer opportunities to develop independence through unstructured, real-world experiences.”
- Jonathan Haidt’s work highlights a broader shift—from what he calls a *play-based childhood* to a more *phone-based and adult-managed childhood*.”
- “So we have a generation entering a more demanding, complex university environment—with fewer opportunities to have practised independence beforehand.”
- “In the past, young people had more opportunities for:
 - unstructured time
 - independent problem-solving
 - navigating social situations on their own
- Today, many of these experiences are:
 - reduced
 - replaced
 - or mediated through adults or technology”



Preparing for University: Parent Perspectives

We are gathering brief parent perspectives on preparing students for university. This is not an evaluation of any specific school, but an opportunity to reflect on student readiness and the transition experience. Your responses will contribute to a professional discussion on how schools can better support students and families. Responses are anonymous.

junita.lingam@acsinternational.edu.sg [Switch accounts](#)



Not shared

What are your biggest concerns about your child going to university?

Your answer

How confident do you feel about your child's readiness for university?

1 2 3 4 5

Not confident at all Very confident



In which areas do you feel your child may need more support? (Select up to 2)

- Time management and independence
- Emotional resilience / coping with stress
- Decision-making (courses, pathways)
- Social confidence / making friends
- Academic readiness
- Life skills (e.g. routines, responsibility)
- Other

How involved do you feel you need to be in your child's university planning?

- Very involved (guiding most decisions)
- Moderately involved (supporting and advising)
- Minimally involved (child leads most decisions)

What would help you feel more confident in your child's transition to university?

Your answer



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Looking Back: Supporting Your Child's Transition to University

We are gathering brief parent perspectives to better understand how students can be supported in their transition to university. This is not an evaluation of any specific school, but an opportunity to reflect on student readiness and the transition experience.

Your insights will help inform a professional conference discussion on how schools and universities can better support students and families. Responses are anonymous.

junita.lingam@acsinternational.edu.sg [Switch accounts](#)



 Not shared

What year of university is your child currently in?

- Enrolling in 2026
- Year 1
- Year 2
- Year 3
- Year 4+
- Graduated from University



What surprised you most about your child's transition to university?

Your answer

Looking back, what do you wish your child had been better prepared for? (Select up to 2 options)

- Managing time and workload independently
- Coping with stress and setbacks
- Making decisions without guidance
- Communicating with professors / adults
- Building friendships / social adjustment
- Practical life skills (e.g. routines, responsibilities)
- Other:

As a parent, what caused you the most anxiety (if any) during this transition?

Your answer



Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently in how you supported your child?

Your answer

What advice would you give to parents whose children are about to start university?

Your answer

Submit

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