

# How parents and partners can support student engagement

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide makes suggestions about how parents and partners can support high quality learning outcomes and a positive student experience.



## How can parents and partners support high quality learning?

Student engagement is about students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning, and how institutions support students' involvement.

A large body of research evidence highlights the positive effect that student engagement has on desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and good grades. Greater engagement with university also means a more enjoyable experience for the student.

Awareness of the importance of university student engagement is growing in Australia. As a result there is growing interest in the role that parents and partners might play in enhancing students' engagement with study.

The 'activities' likely to generate high quality learning include things like: doing the set pre-reading for class; regular private study outside of class; working hard to meet or exceed staff expectations; and getting involved in active learning such as working with other students on a project.

There are many ways that parents and partners can contribute to students' engagement with such activities and with their university experience and learning.

This guide provides some initial pointers. You can find out more by visiting [www.acer.edu.au/ausse](http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse).

## Show empathy and understanding

Starting university can be exciting for students and, at the same time, it can also be daunting. The environment is new and there are many unfamiliar systems and practices with which a student must come to terms. The amount of information related to administrative and academic requirements that a student needs to absorb can be overwhelming for many.

Parents and partners can help by providing an empathetic ear. They can be that 'non-judgemental someone' with whom students can debrief as they come to terms with what university study and learning entails. Students don't necessarily need advice about what to do – but subtly conveyed empathy for the challenges they are facing can help them persist and overcome them.

Even after students move into the later years of study, it can be very helpful to have someone outside the university environment to talk to about their experiences. Parents and partners can have a key role here.

## Demonstrate interest

Parents and partners can contribute to student engagement by showing interest in what students are learning at university. Ask questions about the topics covered, what happened in classes that day, and what their assignments are about. These are all useful ways to start a conversation and demonstrate interest. As well, helping people link their study with other parts of their life enhances the depth and relevance of learning.

One benefit of discussing the concepts students are learning is that doing so will help them clarify and understand the ideas better. And

parents and partners are often pleasantly surprised at how interested they become in the subjects being studied.

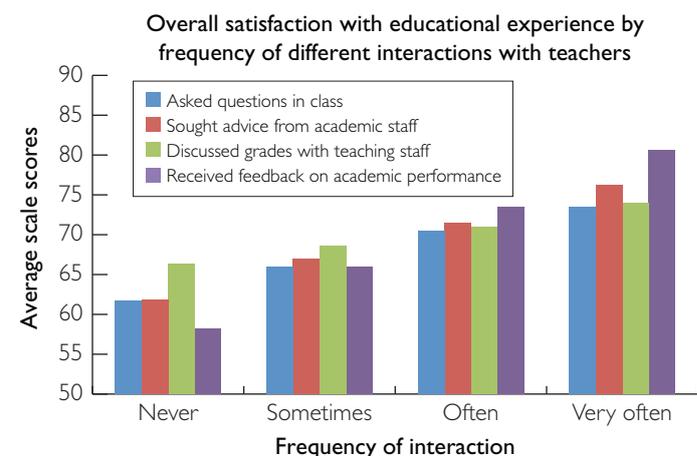
## Encourage involvement

Asking questions in class or online is one simple strategy students can use to better engage with their study. Parents and partners can play an important role in encouraging student involvement through suggesting strategies like these. Remind students that if they don't understand something, the chances are that others probably don't either. This kind of observation can be reassuring, and it may help them summon the courage to ask a question to help themselves and their classmates.

Parents and partners can encourage students to get involved in other ways. For example, students can be encouraged to take up some tutoring, perhaps of high school students or university students in earlier years. Tutoring helps sharpen one's own understanding of topics. Tutoring also helps develop the tutor's communication and interpersonal skills – all useful for learning and for future employment prospects.

Interacting with university staff is a good way for students to become, and feel, engaged. Parents and partners can encourage students to make an appointment during the available times to discuss grades or other feedback on assignments with teaching staff. Suggest that students ask teaching staff to explain why marks have been lost, and how the next assignment might be improved. These strategies will encourage students to interact meaningfully with staff and to learn from the experience.

This graph uses data from the 2008 AUSSE to show the relationship between students' overall satisfaction with university and the frequency with which they ask questions during class, seek advice from academic staff, discuss their grades with teaching staff, and receive feedback on academic performance. As you can see, students who indicate that they never have had these types of interactions tend to be much less satisfied overall than students who have these types of interactions with teachers more frequently.



Parents and partners can also encourage students to join, or form and invite others to join, a study group. Together, the group members can help each other through the study experience by providing

support, advice and encouragement for each other. Such groups assist students with completing assignments. They can also provide valuable opportunities to develop critical thinking and discussion skills, and skills in speaking, presenting, writing, and in working in groups and teams. Parents and partners can help facilitate such groups by allowing use of an appropriate and comfortable space at home, and by providing sustenance for hardworking students.

### Encourage engagement through paid work and other opportunities

AUSSE 2008 results suggest that around two-thirds of all undergraduate students work while studying. Part-time work can be very helpful to engagement with university study. It provides financial support, and it can also provide learning opportunities and experience that can add value to the formal study being undertaken. But it is important that paid employment supplements rather than detracts from university study. Encouraging students to minimise the number of paid work shifts they undertake each week, particularly at busy and critical times, can help facilitate ongoing engagement with study. Parents and partners can also encourage students to discuss their career options and plans with teaching, careers and other student services staff as they move through their degree.

Another idea that parents and partners might suggest is for students to seek out opportunities to participate in 'work-integrated-learning' through, for example, a practicum, an internship, fieldwork, industry placement, work experience or a clinical placement. All universities will offer opportunities of this kind, depending on the area of study, and encouragement to find and pursue these opportunities will provide immediate and lifelong benefits to students.

Similarly, many universities provide opportunities to study abroad or participate in an overseas exchange program. Parents and partners can encourage students to ask lecturers about the particular opportunities available at their university.

### Acknowledge success

Finally, parents and partners have an important role to play in helping students stay engaged. Acknowledge small successes such as handing in all first semester assignments on time. Celebrate bigger successes such as doing well on exams and other assessments. Acknowledgement and celebration can be very encouraging for students, particularly when the demands of university study are at their peaks.

Study is hard. Parents and partners are well placed to acknowledge this and to remind students of how well they have done and can do.



### About this guide

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide forms part of the suite of resources developed by ACER and the broader AUSSE community to enhance students' engagement in effective educational practices. This guide was written by Professor Marcia Devlin, Chair in Higher Education Research, Deakin University. Visit [www.acer.edu.au/ausse](http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse) for further information about the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement.