

THINK
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DO

VET to uni: how do students experience the transition?

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Background and research context

- TAFE students are 11% of UTS's commencing students.
- Developing TAFE access pathways is a key element of the *UTS Widening Participation Strategy*.
- The research aims to capture the student voice regarding early transition experiences and the ongoing impact of entering through VET pathways, to strengthen support from pre-enrolment through to study completion.

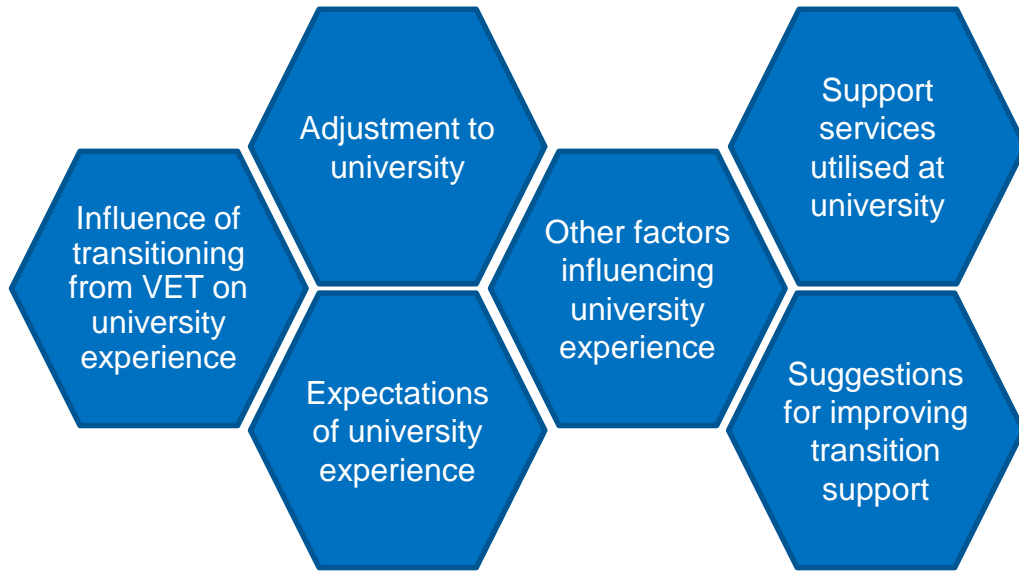
Key factors influencing VET students' transition to university

- Pedagogic differences between VET and university
- Academic literacy factors
- Greater focus at university on student autonomy and self-regulation
- Credit recognition issues
- Managing heavier study load within context of personal challenges.

Method

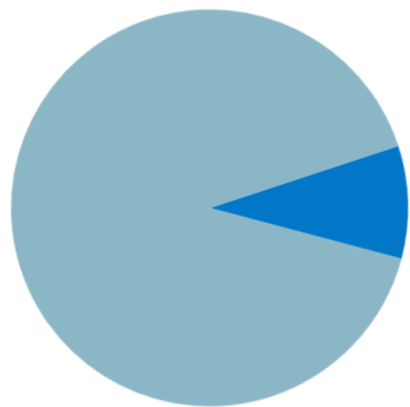
Online survey and focus groups designed to investigate the transition experience of students who entered UTS through a VET pathway.

Survey dimensions:

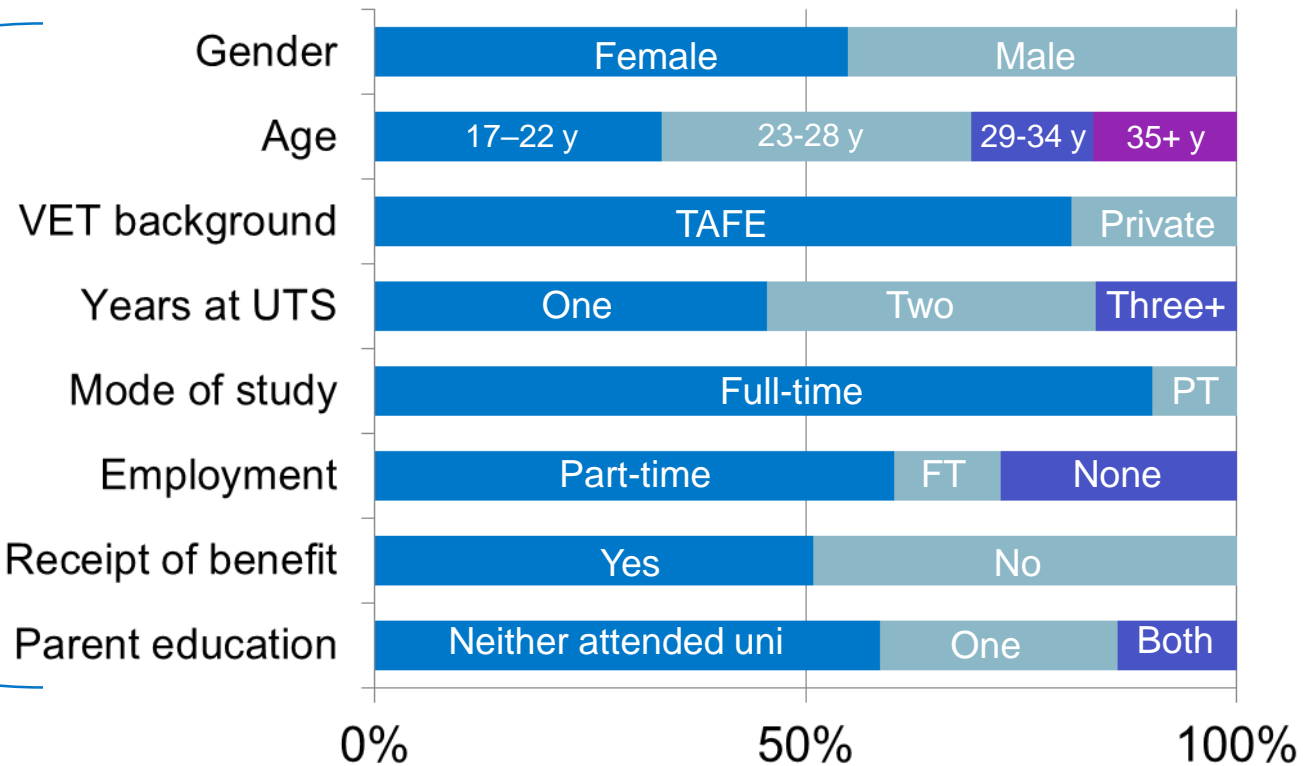


- First or second year students invited to participate (n=1351)
- Quantitative and qualitative survey data collated and coded for analysis (SPSS 22)
- Themes emerging from the survey examined in student focus groups (n=27)

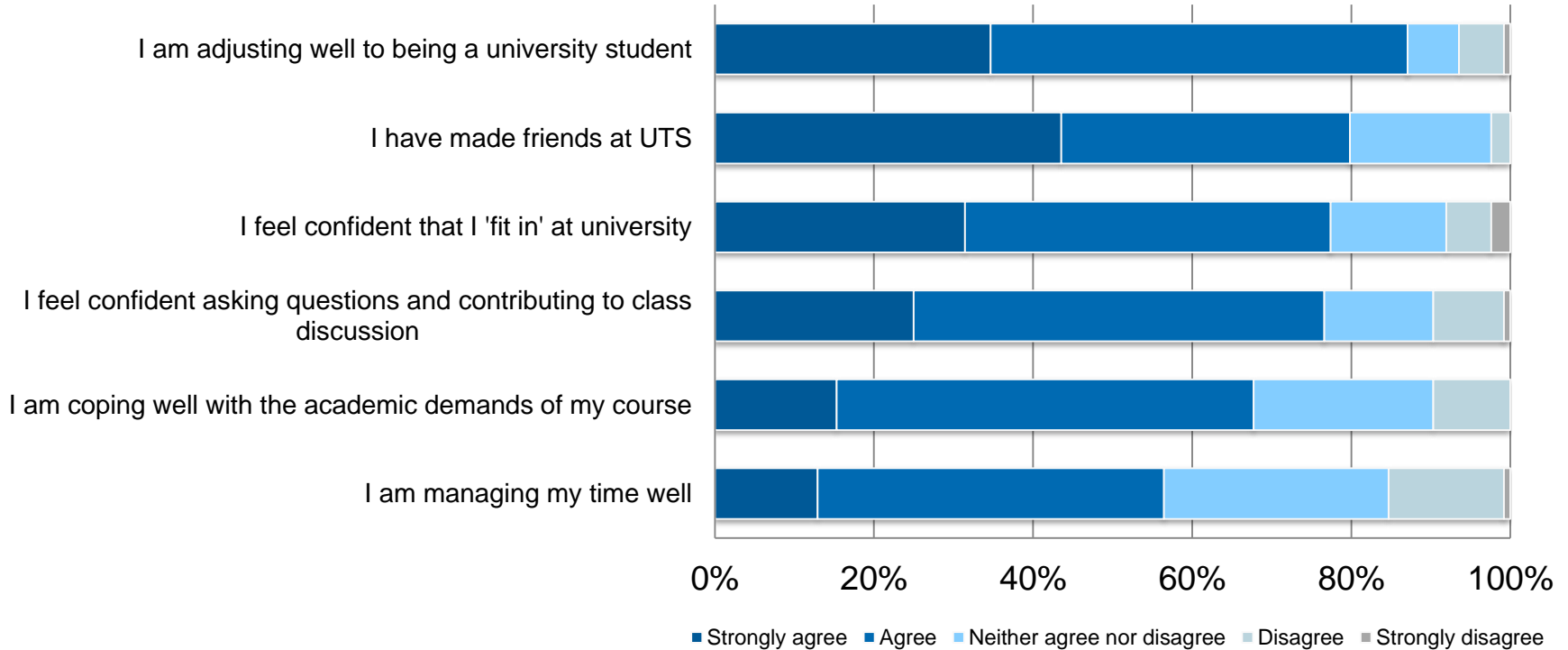
Results – Characteristics of the sample



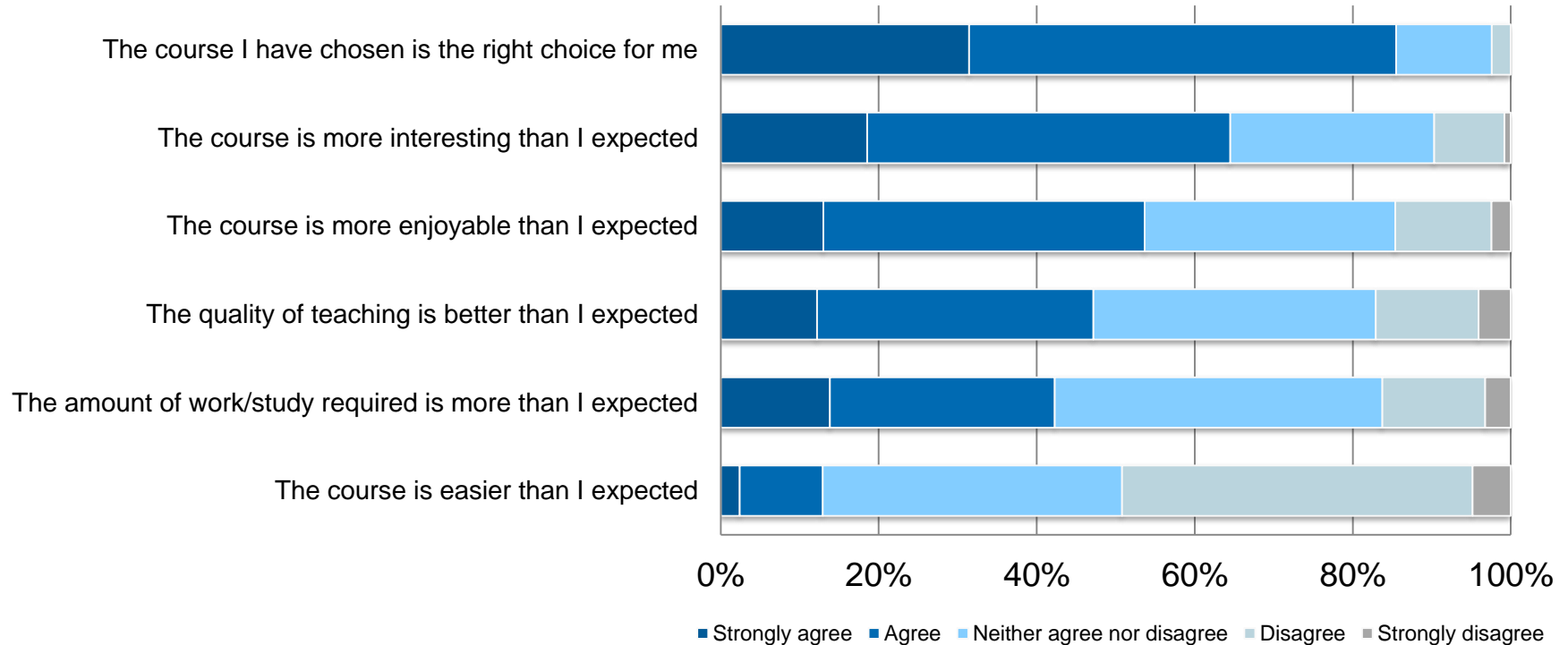
9.2% response rate (n=124)



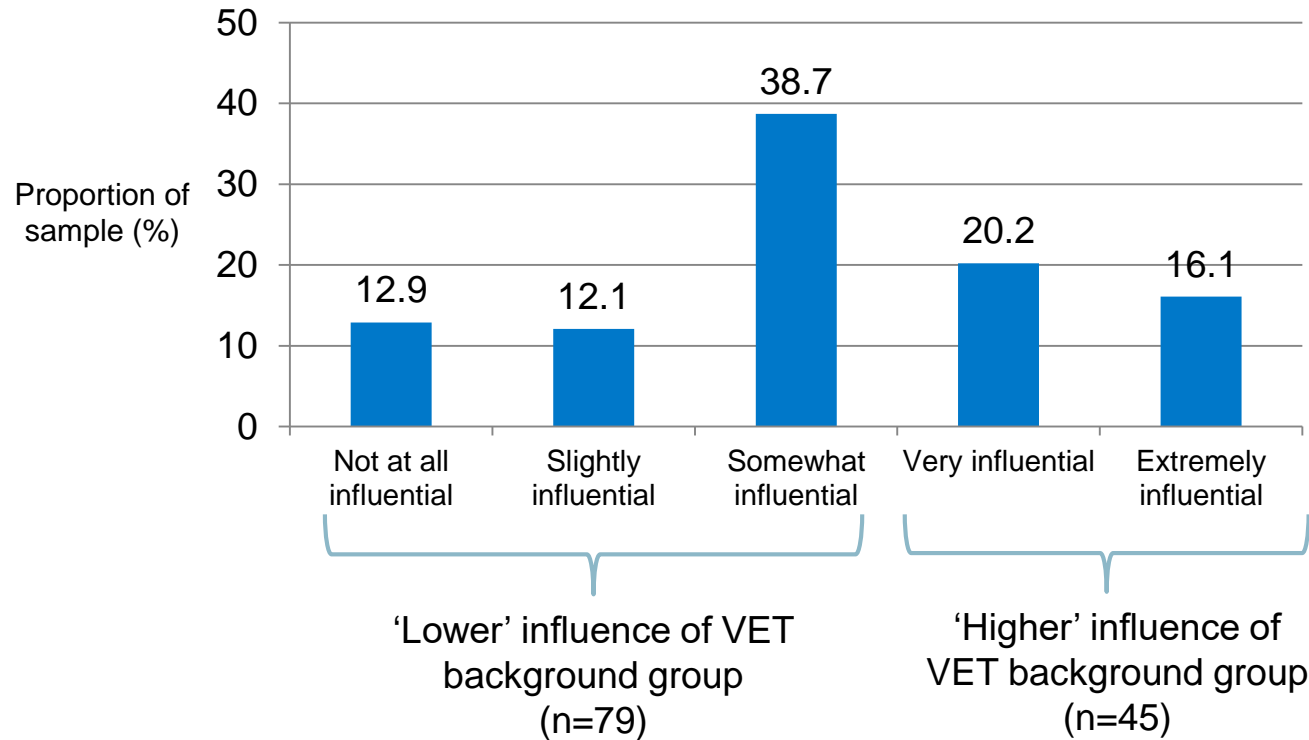
Adjustment to university by students from a VET background



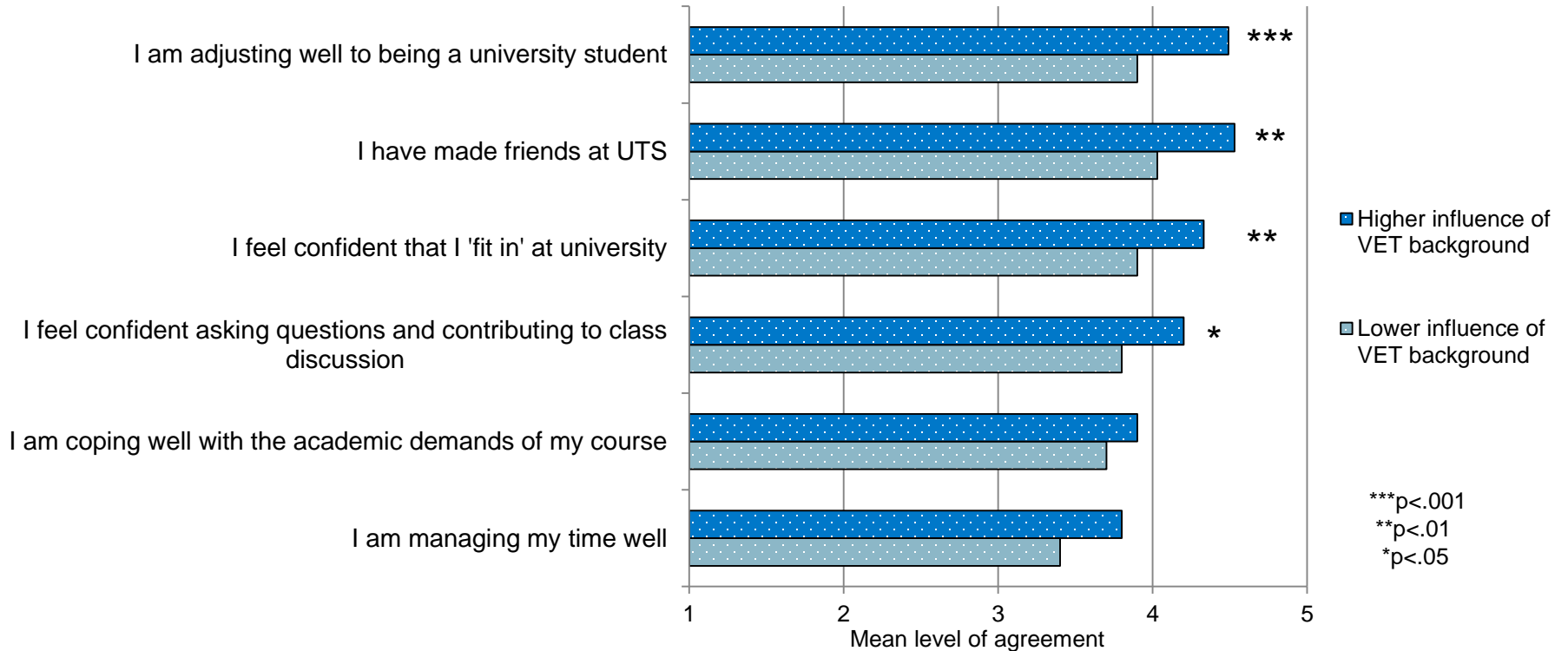
Expectations of university by students from a VET background



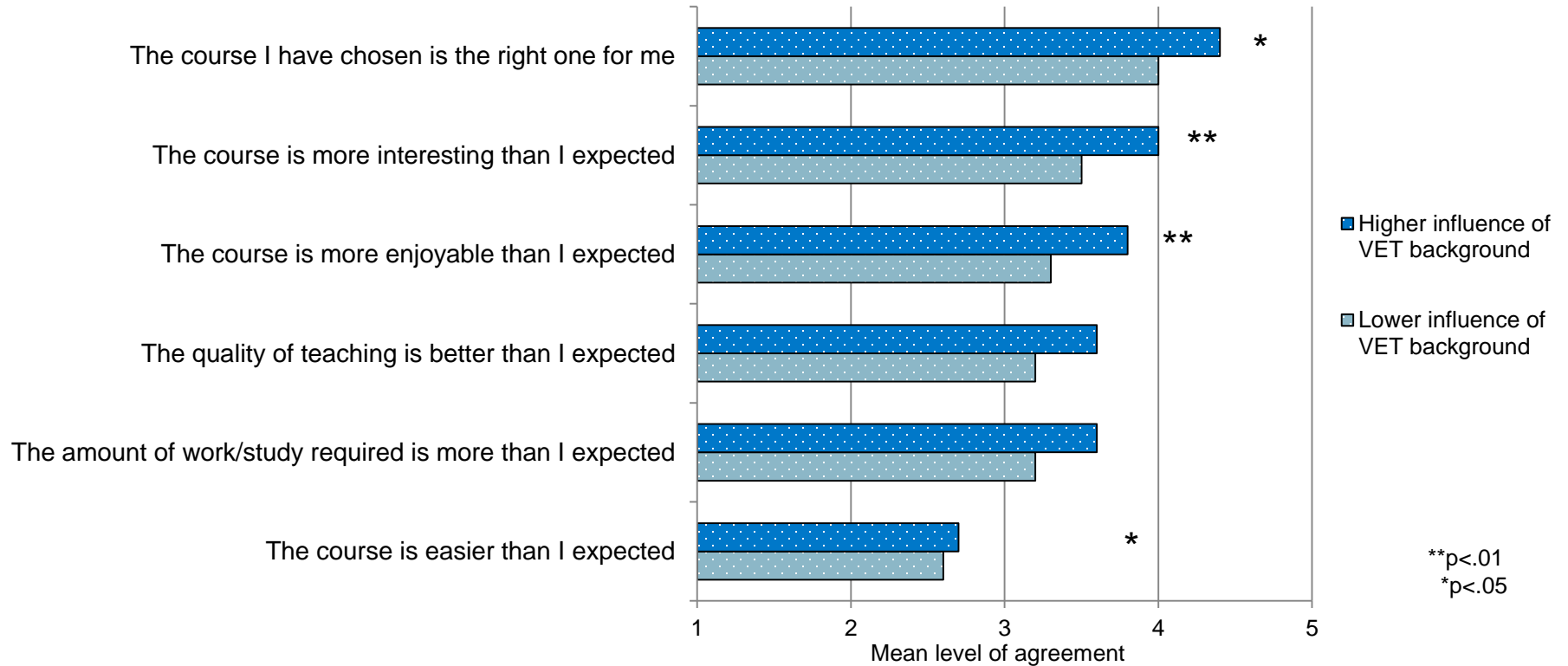
Influence of transitioning from a VET background on university experience



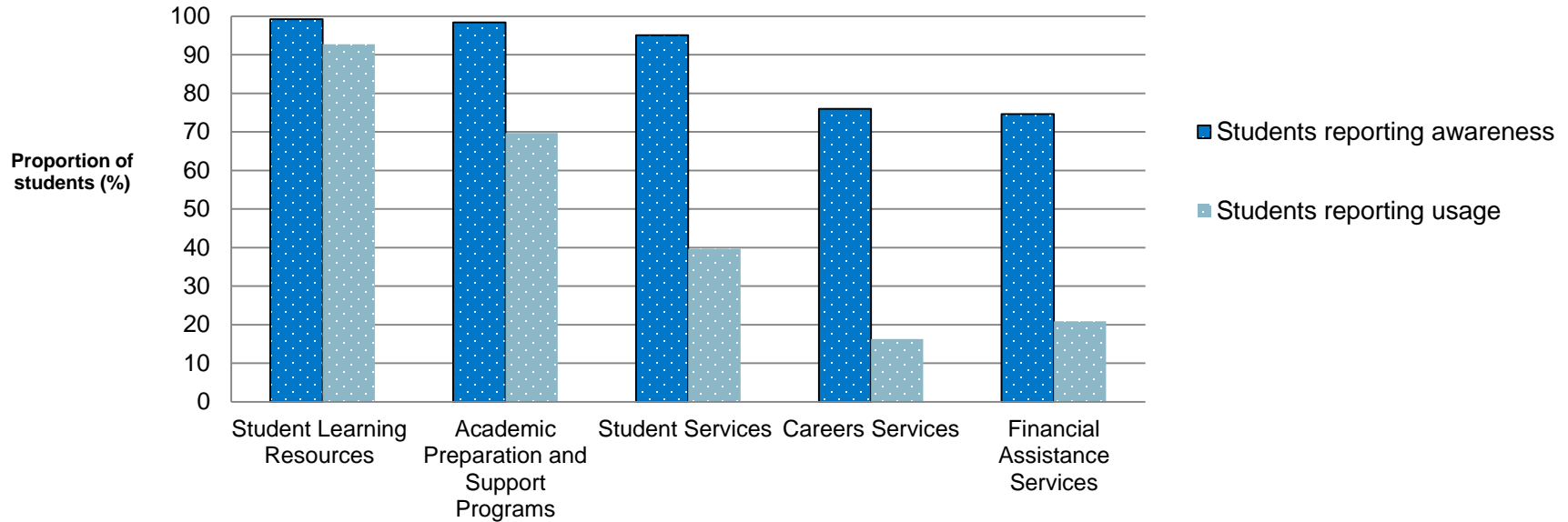
Influence of VET background and adjustment to university



Influence of VET background and student expectations of university



Engagement with support services and resources by students who have transitioned to UTS from a VET background



Issue of conversion of awareness of support services into usage where appropriate

Conceptualising transition between the habitus of TAFE and the habitus of the university

- **Habitus** – norms and practices of particular social classes or groups, produced through the structures of a particular environment and embedded in every day actions (Bourdieu 1977, 1990).
- Habitus conveys more than culture – mutuality of agency and structure in habitus.
- **Institutional habitus** – dispositions shape an individual's thinking, feeling and behaviour through an intermediate organisation such as a school or workplace (Reay 1998) – or TAFE or university.

Conceptualising the process of transition

Transition:

- the capacity to navigate change, without having full control over and/or knowledge about what the change involves
- non-linear and ongoing
- involves mutuality of agency and structure
- may include key turning points involving anxiety, risk and difficulty for some people – which might be important factors in successful transition for some students
- may also include periods of routine and stability.

(Gale and Parker 2011)

Major themes emerging from focus group discussions

1. **Success at TAFE studies is a powerful confidence booster and affirmation of students' capabilities:**

The fact that you've graduated from TAFE – I've done that!

2. **TAFE teachers play a pivotal role in instilling self-belief and confidence in their students:**

I'll be forever grateful for the teachers' belief in me when I didn't believe in myself....They just keep you going one bit at a time.

I thought 'how am going to be able to handle that' and it didn't help when family were like 'no you won't be able to'I thought uni was going to be hell....but I had a TAFE teacher who said 'no no no you have to go to UTS, you'll be really good'.

Major themes emerging from focus group discussions

3.The TAFE teacher-student relationship is embedded in a wider supportive environment (habitus) where students feel secure and valued:

Things at TAFE make you feel comfortable.

Yeah, teaching at TAFE was really personalised.

TAFE was such an enclosed environment, it's so tiny, compared to university where there are hundreds of other students in a lecture.

....if you were struggling at TAFE you didn't feel like a small fish in a big pond, like sometimes in lectures I won't understand something, I'm still a bit shy....I don't have the courage to say I'm struggling with this.

Major themes emerging from focus group discussions

4. TAFE is good preparation for university study:

I saw TAFE as a stepping stone....it wasn't like school to university, it was like little steps to get to university, so yeah, you feel better prepared for the environment you're walking into.

I think if I'd come straight from school I would have been terribly underprepared....

....it's a complete package the TPC....I would have been lost without TAFE beforehand....when I first started uni as we went through things I thought 'oh, they taught me that at TAFE....i can do that, I know about that', it gave me confidence.

Major themes emerging from focus group discussions

5. Transition can be incredibly difficult, but students adapt and take responsibility for their own learning:

The thing I learned from TAFE is the fact that you have to put the effort in, to get the results....I apply that now to uni and it pays off eventually.

I had one tutor, he totally ripped me apart at the start, but he supported my ideas, and worked on it, and from there he deconstructed me, basically really into how I should be thinking in class, he sort of realigned it, which was the best thing he's done for me, because if I'd kept thinking in the same mindset I would not be doing really well.

I grew accustomed to TAFE, now I've grown accustomed to university, so it's sort of like I grew into the culture, grew into how things are done, sort of adapting to it.

Conclusion

- Key messages for TAFE and university teachers:
 - Positive influence of TAFE teachers on student confidence and aspiration
 - Positive impact of provision of practical skills through VET study
 - Support student transition through explicit identification of differences in learning and teaching environments prior to commencement
 - Requirement for a conversation about how we should be defining success for these students given the complexity of their lives and the reality of VET Diploma/university degree content and approaches to learning.