

MAXIMISING YOUR STUDENT EXPERIENCE

I should have done this in the first place! It will be so useful for my learning experience and it will help me secure a future job!

Given the time, money and effort involved in coming to Australia to study, you of course want to make sure the experience is worthwhile. As you pack up and head off to an unfamiliar country, you will certainly be asking yourself questions like these:

- How can I make the most of my student experience in Australia?
- How can I make sure my time there will help me after graduation, when I'm looking for employment?
- How can I minimise any likely obstacles to my success in my studies in Australia?

The aim of this chapter is to offer you some shortcuts and tips – based on the experiences of many international students who have gone before you – that will help you derive the maximum benefit from your time in Australia.

Managing parental expectations

Most students' experiences are heavily bound up with the expectations of their parents, in part due to natural emotional ties, as well as to the financial support their parents provide. Many international students have indicated to me that they were in Australia because 'my parents told me so'.

There are generally three ways in which parents relate to their student children, and each way significantly influences how students approach and cope with their overseas education: (1) unrealistic expectations; (2) over expectations; and (3) no expectations. Given your particular background and family norms, you will need to consider how to manage your relationship with your parents to produce a positive experience for all of you. I outline some strategies below and pose some questions for you to ask your parents to consider.

Unrealistic expectations

I must study day and night just to get the results that my parents want. I will need to skip any social activities or otherwise I will not be able to keep up with my work and get the required exam grades.

I'm so stressed now! I need to study in the day and work at night. My parents expect me to obtain good grades and earn my own living expenses!

I cannot tell my parents that I just failed (or performed badly in) a subject because they will kill me! They don't understand that I am struggling badly due to my English proficiency and I feel very lonely here because I do not have any friends!

The main reason why parents often set unrealistic expectations is that they are unaware of the real environment that their children are facing in Australia. I acknowledge that some parents cannot afford to visit Australia, but you can encourage your parents to speak to you often, to check on your progress and to help match their expectations to the reality of your experiences. Here are some topics you can explore with your parents to help them adopt more realistic expectations:

THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR COURSE AND THE TIME DEMANDS OF ITS DIFFERENT COMPONENTS. Familiarise your parents with your different units of study and the number of class hours and private study hours each demands.

THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO ACHIEVE HIGH DISTINCTIONS AND OTHER GRADES. Your parents may not realise that only a maximum of 5% of students achieve the top grades – and that top grades may demand very high proficiency in English.

THE COST OF LIVING IN AUSTRALIA. Convert your rent, food, transport and other costs into your home country's currency so your parents appreciate exactly where your money is going.

THE TYPICAL AMOUNT YOU CAN EARN IN PART-TIME/CASUAL EMPLOYMENT AND OPTIONS FOR STUDENT EMPLOYMENT. Relate this information to the cost of living calculations so your parents can see how many hours you need to work to earn a part-time income.

Although some parents may have previously studied overseas, you should gently remind them that their experiences may be very different to what you are facing (for example, different countries, universities, courses, and so on).

Over-protective parents

Although parents have their children's welfare at heart, the actions of over-protective parents may be counterproductive, with so many constraints imposed that students derive little enjoyment or benefit from their time in Australia. Again, the problem is often that your parents lack accurate information about

Why is orientation important?

Orientation: an introduction, as to guide one in adjusting to new surroundings, employment, activity, or similar activities; or the ability to locate oneself in one's environment with reference to time, place, and people. – <www.dictionary.com>

If you have any prior work experience, you will appreciate the need for an orientation session. During your first day at work, it is normally compulsory for a senior staff member to give you an orientation to the company and to your job. You are told about your responsibilities, safety issues and other things related to your employment. During the workplace orientation, you have the opportunity to meet your colleagues and learn more about them.

Similarly, during a university orientation, you will be briefed on your responsibilities as a student, safety issues (for example, police and health services) and things relevant to your overseas studies (for example, library facilities, campus layout). You will have the opportunity to increase your initial social network by interacting with both new and senior students (for instance, orientation guides), through participating in ice-breaker activities and short trips.

However, the most important aspect of an orientation is that it can reduce the impact of culture shock experienced by international students when they first arrive in Australia. Like most international students, you are likely to feel very lost because at first because you will be unfamiliar with your surroundings and the people. University orientation acts as a safety net for international students, lessening the 'shock' and providing information to enhance your ability to resolve it. If you happen to miss orientation, you will find it much harder to overcome culture shock by yourself.

University learning strategies

Learning: (1) knowledge acquired by systematic study in any field of scholarly application; or (2) the act or process of acquiring knowledge or skill – <www.dictionary.com>

It is strange that we rarely ponder the true meaning of the word ‘learning’, even though it is a word we have used since we were young. Most international students assume that once they clear their unit assessment and exams, they can choose to forget what they have learned at university. But university studies should be the foundation for your future career.

Your university studies are the main component of your overseas education. On average, you can expect to spend up to 20 official contact hours (lectures, tutorials and labs) per week. Depending on your study strategies, you will spend 40, or even 50, hours per week in private study and completing assignments.

Before you start university, 70 hours of study per week may seem an unrealistically high number. But many students will tell you that this is actually quite achievable, and that you might need to invest even more hours if you are aiming to secure those elusive top grades. However, the main questions that you should always ask yourself during your university years are: ‘Are my study strategies effective?’ and ‘Am I studying “smart” rather than “hard”?’

As highlighted in the following section, investing large amounts of time in your studies may not bring about good academic grades if you are not studying properly. In fact, over-investment in your studies may deter you from achieving a satisfying student experience in Australia, given that it could deprive you of time to do other things during your life overseas.

Understanding the importance of learning in university

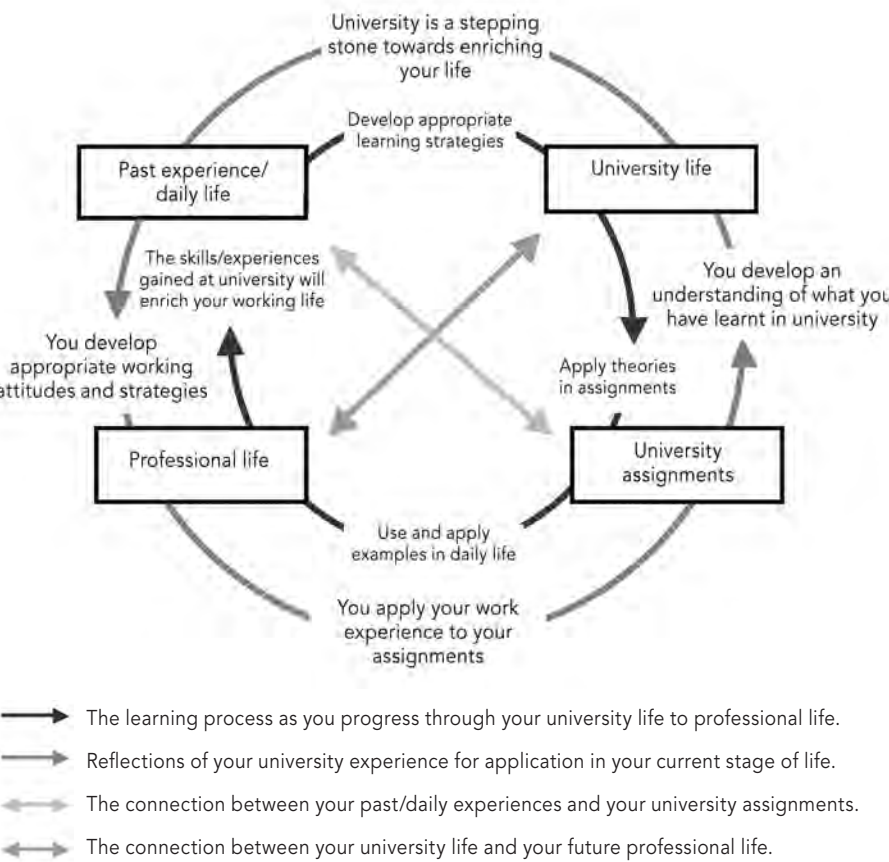
University studies involve acquiring knowledge in order to be able to apply it to problems, challenges and tasks in your professional life in the future. Since knowledge is always expanding, and no course can give you all the ‘content’ you will need, a key component of university study is learning independent research skills that you will apply throughout your career.

Although assignments (exams, essays, and so on) act as a gauge of your knowledge, their main purpose is to prepare you to be able to apply the information and research skills you have learned at uni once you have left university.

As with life itself, the process of learning at university involves cycles of trial and error, where you discover the most efficient ways of handling different challenges. You should begin by identifying successful study strategies that enable you to perform to the best of your abilities.

Unfortunately, most international students consider university studies as a passing stage in their life. They assume that they will be able to secure a job immediately after graduation, regardless of their university experience. Thus, their main priority during university is just to study and get good grades.

However, good grades do not equate to a capacity to excel in your working life. The process of learning during university involves periods of trial and error where you discover the most efficient ways of handling different challenges, and these skills are increasingly being recognised by potential employers as a desirable graduate attribute. Therefore, your university life should also be about learning to apply your acquired knowledge and experiences rather than just obtaining good grades. The relationship between your university experience, your working life and personal life is shown in the following figure:



Unfortunately, it is not until they have graduated that many international students become aware of the potential to apply the skills and experiences they have developed from their time at university to other aspects of their lives. Based on the above figure, the following applications can be made:

YOUR PAST AND DAILY EXPERIENCES CAN ACTUALLY ENHANCE YOUR ASSIGNMENTS. For example, your home country experience provides intercultural perspectives in your assessment arguments. This would distinguish your assignments from those of domestic students.

WORKING PART-TIME DURING YOUR STUDIES GIVES YOU ANOTHER VENUE TO APPLY YOUR KNOWLEDGE. Part-time work experience would also facilitate your learning process at university, helping you to improve your assessments.

UNIVERSITY ASSIGNMENTS PROVIDE YOU WITH A PLATFORM TO LEARN AND UNDERSTAND HOW THE PROFESSIONAL (WORKING) ENVIRONMENT OPERATES IN REALITY. For example, your accounting assignments are based on real-life systems and techniques, giving you the chance to practise prior to entering the workforce.

WORK EXPERIENCE WILL HELP YOU UNDERSTAND CONCEPTS AND ENABLE YOU TO TACKLE ASSIGNMENTS IN A REALISTIC MANNER. This will be especially useful if, after graduation, you need to undertake a professional course as part of full-time employment.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE PROVIDES YOU WITH THE VENUE TO APPLY ALL OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE. Subsequently, you may choose to return to university for further studies to address any deficiencies in your current knowledge.

After understanding the potential applications of your university studies to other aspects of your life, the next step is to develop successful study strategies.

Study strategies

“ You got such good grades – what are your secret study methods? ”

It is natural for students to ask this question because they assume that there is one secret studying technique that – if only they knew it – would ensure those

elusive high grades. Similarly, there are many books on study techniques where the authors claim that you will be able to excel in your studies if you follow their techniques. Yet students who follow those study techniques find that they do not work at all! Successful study techniques are very much dependent on each student's personality and experience, as well as on the material to be mastered. A study technique that is successful for one student may not produce the same result for other students. Similarly, techniques that may have worked at school will not necessarily work with the more complex content and demands of university material. Take advantage of the free courses in study skills offered by your university's learning centre.

Here are some study strategies for university study whose benefits and drawbacks you need to consider.

Attend lectures

Lectures are intended to guide you in your studies and equip you with the necessary knowledge to complete the unit. Their most valuable role is to give you an overview of a subject. The lecturer will outline the scope and dimensions of a field, showing you how the aspects of the subject interrelate and pointing you towards the topics you need to study in more detail.

Attendance at most lectures is not compulsory, but regular lecture attendance has been shown to correlate with better results, especially for undergraduates. It is very common for most international students to attend all of their lectures when they first start their overseas studies, given the amount of money they have paid to study at an Australian university. Do not be surprised if your attendance decreases as you progress through your education. With the growing use of online lectures, where you can listen to the lectures at home and in your own time, fewer students are attending lectures, especially when they are held at odd hours (for example, 8am in the morning or late at night).

Regular attendance at lectures does not translate automatically into high scores, especially if you spend most of the time sleeping and doing other things (for example, reading newspapers and magazines). Similarly, if the lecturers are very boring (for example, they read from the presentation slides and speak in a monotone), you may not be able to pay attention and would be better off studying the material online or by private study.

Take clear notes

To make the most of lecture attendance or listening to online lectures, you need to take clear, legible notes that enable you to review the material later in private study. Most university learning centres offer courses in note taking, which will help you learn to listen for and note only the key terms, concepts and references. Develop your own shorthand notations for common terms in each subject, and make sure you clearly date and number all pages of your notes. File them chronologically, and as assessment dates approach, re-read them in conjunction with the relevant sections of textbooks or course readers. Good lecturers – and even mediocre ones – give lectures that provide you with a map of a subject area. If you can get the outline of this map recorded in your notes, you are in an excellent position to master the subject. You can fill in the details as you prepare assessment tasks, but at least you know where you're headed!

Schedule assignments to ensure completion

As soon as you receive your course outline, record assignment deadlines in your diary or computer planner. Then, work back from the deadline to plan the stages involved in completing the task. How long before the final deadline will you need to start researching and reading? When will you start writing? How long will you allow between your first and final draft? Time management skills are vital at university, just as they are in the work place.

I used to complete my assignments at least one week before the due date so that I had time to check my work before submission. This allowed me to secure a good grade. However, some of my friends would only start their assignments the day before the due date – yet they still managed to secure a good grade! On the occasions when I tried their strategy (and completed my assignments at the last minute), I failed miserably. On the other hand, when my friends tried to complete their assignments earlier, they found that they lost their focus easily and spent most of their time unconstructively rather than working on the assignments. Find what works for you, provided it enables you to produce quality work within the deadlines.

Revise for exams

Many students study consistently throughout the semester because they recognise that they benefit from more time to absorb the knowledge re-

quired. If you have worked steadily all semester, then your study revision timetable, which you might draw up only two or three weeks or so before the exam period, should not involve more than a modest increase in your study intensity.

Some students convince themselves that last minute exam preparation will be adequate for them to obtain a decent grade – a risky belief. You are unwise to rely on last-minute revision unless you have physical stamina and a phenomenal memory.

The limitations of cramming and mugging

One challenge with university work is simply to remember what you have learned in order to produce and apply it at exam time. Some students assume that the way to do this is by cramming: memorising content, usually in an intense burst right before exams. But cramming is a short-term study strategy, with very limited benefits, as a comparison against long-term learning strategies shows:

	Learning	Cramming/mugging
Characteristics of study methods	Systematic	Messy; lacking coordination
Time frame of study	Normally distributed throughout the semester	Concentrated in last minute preparations
Memory of what has been studied	Long-term	Short-term
Application of knowledge	High	Low
Pros (advantages)	1. Ability to apply knowledge 2. Study stress is distributed throughout the semester 3. Adequate time for preparation to maximise grades	1. More time for other activities (e.g. work and socialising) 2. Able to enjoy life and have fun during most of the semester
Cons (disadvantages)	1. Need to be well-disciplined to maximise results from learning plan 2. Tendency to become over-focused on studies and ignore other activities (e.g. socialising) 3. If learning is not well planned, time may be wasted unnecessarily and you may not be able to achieve desirable outcomes	1. Inability to remember and apply what you learned at university 2. Great stress experienced prior to assignments may impact on performance 3. Greater possibilities of getting sick due to late night studying and not taking care of health

Some students achieve high results in exams if they cram at the last minute. However, not everyone can duplicate this feat, and evidence suggests that cramming is of little long-term benefit. Although much may have been crammed, little may in fact have been learned. You need to ask yourself whether cramming is really the best way to manage your university studies. The answer is likely to be ‘no’.

Another study strategy you’ll come across at university is known informally as ‘mugging’. This refers to intensive studying, but over a longer period than cramming. Many students achieve good results from intensive mugging.

But not all time spent mugging is useful. Many students often claim that they were ‘studying’ but in fact they were wasting their time (for example, chatting with friends, sleeping, watching online videos and reading blogs). This time could be better utilised in other activities that may assist you to study better (for example, sports to improve physical health, and social outings to relieve stress). Remember: study smart, not hard!

Research strategies

While studying involves working through material you already have before you, researching involves finding out (usually independently) information from sources. Learning how to carry out research is one of the main skills that differentiate university education from school education.

Research is partly about identifying appropriate sources to tap for information and partly about learning how to extract and critically evaluate relevant information from those sources. What counts as an appropriate source will vary across disciplines but is likely to encompass printed books and journals, online journals, databases, libraries, websites, forums, published proceedings of conferences, experts, government records, and so on.

The place to start learning about what research sources are available is your university’s library. Do a tour of your library in Orientation Week, and take whatever free courses are available in using online catalogues and databases. Use the Inquiry Services at the library – there is always a reference librarian on duty to point you towards relevant sources. At most university libraries you can also book a one-to-one session with a librarian, who will help you identify sources for a specific research task. Your course outline

will also point you towards the most relevant research sources in the subject.

Your university's learning centre will almost certainly offer free courses in research techniques, moving beyond the 'how do I find?' step to the 'how do I interpret?' step. University-level research is not just about listing information; it is about learning to evaluate information on the basis of how it was arrived at, who is proposing it, whether it has been subject to scholarly testing and scrutiny, what vested interests may lie behind it and so on. Adopting a critical stance towards all information means you will also learn to treat public and non-academic sources with care. You will appreciate why Wikipedia should not appear as a reference source in your university assignments. However, Wikipedia is an excellent tool to help you formulate your thoughts and search for the appropriate references.

Study and stress

Only you can discover your best study strategies, drawing on your experiences prior to your university studies and your stress threshold. If the education system in your own country did not give you the opportunity to try different strategies, you will need to ask yourself the following questions to discover what is likely to work for you:

What is my stress tolerance?

It is common for everyone to be stressed about their problems and current circumstances. Stress at moderate levels can be positive because it can motivate you to study harder and be competitive. However, if stress is left unchecked, it can place you under unnecessary strain that can severely affect your concentration. This, in turn, can impact negatively on your academic performance. Therefore you must consider how much stress you can take before it becomes negative; and how stress can affect your academic performance.

To help answer these questions, it's useful to compare Type A and Type B personalities. Simply:

TYPE A INDIVIDUALS thrive under stress due to their competitive, impatient and high-achieving nature. These individuals can only perform up to their own high standards if there is stress involved.

TYPE B INDIVIDUALS are the opposite of Type A individuals because they are unable to perform if they are placed under too much stress. They are often considered laid-back, relaxed and patient.

TYPE AB INDIVIDUALS are those individuals who cannot be categorised in either Type A or Type B.

Generally, Type A individuals are more exposed to physical and mental health risks (for example, illness and depression) due to prolonged exposure to stress. In particular, Type As often do not know when to relax until their bodies break down. On the other hand, although Type B individuals may be healthier, they may not be able to perform well in a stressful environment (for instance, a university) unless they have a concrete study plan. Therefore, knowing whether you are a Type A or Type B can help you to plan suitable study strategies.

For example, for Type A individuals, here is some advice:

RELAX OR CATCH UP WITH FRIENDS. Set aside a couple of days to do this.

CREATE A LIST OF TASKS AND PRIORITISE THEM. It is natural for you to take on more tasks than you can handle and this would ensure that you complete the important tasks first.

EAT HEALTHY FOOD AND EXERCISE REGULARLY. This will ensure that your body can keep up with the stress that you are experiencing.

For Type B individuals:

PLAN WELL AHEAD IN YOUR STUDIES AND ENSURE THAT YOU COMPLETE YOUR ASSIGNMENTS ON TIME. As a relaxed individual, you may lose track of time and leave your assignments to the last minute and then get stressed about them.

SET GOALS. As you lack a sense of competitiveness and so are not motivated to get the highest grades, it is essential for you to set goals that are meaningful to you, with specific tasks to achieve, during your education. For example, your goals may include taking a broad range of subjects so your degree is well-rounded. These goals will keep you motivated and help you maximise your Australian education.