

Studying from a Distance

10 tips for regional and remote students

1. Do the ground work

One of the keys to succeeding at study is making sure other areas of your life are well organised and not worrying you. It's particularly important to take care of your finances, accommodation arrangements and your health.

Organising your finances

To study successfully, you must be sure that you can support yourself financially. Consider the average rental prices in the area in which you'll be living; how much money will you need for fees, books, food, bills and entertainment? If you have been used to working full-time, you may need to adjust your spending habits.

If your course is particularly demanding, you may not be able to work much during semester and you will need to budget for this. The workload required to complete a full-time course is similar to that of a full-time job, so keep this in mind when organising paid work. A financial officer on your campus may be able to help with budgeting, and there are bursaries and other resources available through the University <www.services.unimelb.edu.au/finaid/>. You can also ask the campus counsellor for more details.

acknowledge that you are investing time and money into your education

Finding suitable accommodation

If you need to relocate in order to study, be aware that finding suitable accommodation may take some time. Think about the pros and cons of different types of accommodation.

- Find out if there is a housing officer on your campus or phone the campus counsellor

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- Find out if there are residential facilities on your campus – but remember, these might be more expensive than off-campus accommodation. Student share houses are often very close to campus and the rent is cheaper <www.services.unimelb.edu.au/housing/options/associatedcampus.html>
- Check if there are accommodation boards in cafés frequented by students or in the student union office where students advertise for housemates
- Look in the local or daily newspapers for rental accommodation in neighbouring suburbs
- Always consider whether the household will be a good environment in which to study. Will you be able to have a desk in your room, for example, and will there be regular quiet times for you to study?

2. Develop a network

Feeling isolated from family/friends is common for students who have moved away from home to attend uni, and being on a rural or remote campus can amplify this. Therefore it is quite important that you develop a network of friends and acquaintances on campus. Whilst it can be intimidating to meet new people, the benefits are numerous: you will have a group of people with whom you can discuss lectures and assignments, collaborate on difficult tute problems, share references or swap notes if you miss a class. Friends and colleagues can also be an important source of support when you're feeling stressed or lonely. So it's certainly worth making the effort to get to know as many people as you can. Some ways that you can develop a network:

- Make a positive effort to meet new people and swap phone numbers in the first two weeks of semester when workloads are lighter
- Attend faculty welcomes and other orientation activities

- Greet people whom you recognise from your classes when you meet them on campus and talk to the person sitting next to you in your lectures or lab group
- Join a club, play a sport or join your faculty association.

Beyond campus

If you have moved to a campus that is small or relatively isolated, it is important to be resourceful about tapping into local activities and support networks beyond the campus.

Getting involved with the local community is a good way to help build up the support network you will need while studying. Consider:

- Joining local sporting groups
- Visiting areas of local interest
- Getting involved in the local Show or a charity.

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Remember that you can access resources from other campuses too – not just books and materials but also services. For example, the Language and Learning Skills Unit offers a special phone/email appointment service for remote students to help with assignments or other study related problems. Look at the University of Melbourne website to find out about all of these options or ask your librarian for assistance.

3. Embrace technology

Computer technology is used extensively throughout the University for teaching, learning and accessing resources. Therefore it is important that you feel confident in using these technologies (or update your skills now). Many departments put their course materials and handouts online and email is the preferred method of communicating with lecturers on many campuses.

You will be expected to use online research sources to support your essays and some subjects require you to complete online tutorials. Few departments now accept hand-written work. Find out if your campus offers any computer training courses or investigate options in the community to learn basic computer skills.

Familiarise yourself with the library

Ask the librarian to show you around the library (there may be organised library tours or virtual online tours), find out if there are any information skills classes and familiarise yourself with the library layout and procedures. Learn how to use tools such as EndNote to keep track of your references and find out about courses in database searching.

<www.lib.unimelb.edu.au>

4. Plan your time

Time management in study is a crucial issue both for school leavers and for mature age students.

Students who have come straight from the structured sessions provided at school often find it hard to organise their own time. At uni you need to monitor your own progress and plan to complete all assessment tasks, because there's no one compelling you to study.

A timetable can help you to keep track of your time. When making a timetable, include all of your weekly activities (e.g. uni, study, social and sporting activities, part-time job etc) so that you can see all of your commitments at a glance. Ensure that the time you set aside for studying is valuable time. For example, avoid studying too late at night because you'll be too tired to concentrate in class the next day.

Whatever course you study, there are generally routine tasks that need to be completed every week: preparation for lectures and tutes, preparation and/or completion of labs or pracs, completion of problem or tute sheets and a review of lectures. You should list all of these tasks on your weekly timetable. Assignments and essays are extra tasks that need additional time too.

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rules that apply to writing
 uni assignments

Always be ready to make the most of good quality time – when you know you will concentrate well and be able to work. Save this time for thinking and writing or focussed reading. And rather than wasting those small chunks of time, use them for completing minor study tasks.

Finally, if you have family commitments, plan time to spend with your children or partner and make sure that there are times you can relax without feeling guilty. If you are well organised, it is possible to fit in several study blocks over a weekend while still including leisure or family time.



5. Learn about academic writing

Regardless of what you are studying at uni, writing and reading academic English will be part of your course. To do well, you will need to further develop your skills in these areas. Even students studying very practical, 'hands on' courses will find that academic expectations are more complex now than they were at school. It's possible that English and writing may not have been your strong point at school or you may have been out of school for some time. If you feel that you need support in this area, contact the LLSU for assistance <www.services.unimelb.edu.au/llsu/>.

The style of written English that is expected at uni is quite different from other forms of writing and from spoken English. You will need to find out about the special rules that apply when writing uni assignments. These include the format of the assignment; the kind of evidence that is considered acceptable; the vocabulary you can use; and the referencing system you use.

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Generally, it is considered your responsibility to learn these skills in your own time. You can do this by asking your lecturer for models/examples of good answers for your assessment pieces, by looking at books on academic English or by discussing your assignment with a Language and Learning Skills Adviser before you submit it. The University has developed online resources that can help to refresh your memory if you haven't studied for a while, or explain the concepts if they are new to you. Try some of the courses at: <<https://airport.unimelb.edu.au/>>.

6. Keep up

The University semester is much shorter than a school semester, and the pace of learning accelerates sharply. You may find that you cover as much material in your 12 week uni semester as you did in six months at school!

Regular weekly work at uni is essential to success. Regular review of course content will help you retain concepts in your long-term memory and is the key to doing well in subjects with a final exam. Swotvac (the pre-exam study week) is not long enough to cover all of your work at the end of the course. To be most effective, you should review your notes soon after the lecture, preferably within 24 hours.

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Reviewing your notes is not time-consuming: it should only take 15 minutes or so per lecture and it is a good activity to do in those short breaks between classes. This review should not just be a re-reading of notes. First see what you remember about:

- The main points covered in the lecture
- Any new concepts or terms introduced
- Any formulae or facts related to the topic

Then check your notes – what didn't you remember? Are there any gaps in your notes? Annotate or highlight notes, but never rewrite them. Consider putting your notes into a different format (mind map them or draw up a table of comparisons) rather than re-writing them.

7. Stay focussed

A problem faced by all students is that of losing focus. Some mature age students feel that they should read and know everything, leading to feelings of being swamped in the details. Students who have left school more recently can find consistency difficult. It's not unusual to lose motivation at some stage during your studies. Rather than becoming anxious or getting lost in the details, try to see the big picture of how your course fits together as a whole.

Focus on the objectives for each of your subjects. Examine your course outlines carefully and determine how the topics fit in with the course objectives. Consider how you will be examined (exam? assignments?) on different parts of the course and start to organise the material accordingly. Look at old exam papers and determine whether you have a good enough understanding of past topics.

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When considering the work ahead of you, it is useful to remember your reasons for deciding to study. Sometimes it pays to re-focus on why you are doing the course or subject.

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8. Know when and where to get help

One of the best aspects of studying at a smaller campus is the close-knit community that can develop. Everyone knows everyone else and often, how their studies are going. Unfortunately, this can also make it harder for people to admit when they are having difficulties.

If you have a problem you do not have to struggle alone. It may be that you are struggling with your studies, have a financial crisis, or have personal issues to deal with. In all these cases you can receive help confidentially. Sessions with counsellors, language and learning skills advisers and financial advisers are always confidential and can be accessed even if the advisers are not based at your campus. For example, assignments can be faxed to an LLSU adviser and they will then ring you to provide feedback. Course coordinators are also a good first contact for problems.

One of the best things to do when you start your course is to write a list of all the useful names and phone numbers of contacts you might need later on. Some of these services might be located on your campus, others on the Parkville campus and others in the general community.

Along with these phone numbers, you should have the email address and contact numbers of your tutors and lecturers. These can be useful for emergency last minute questions about assignments due after classes are over, finding out how to apply for special consideration or extensions as well as any weekly queries you may have. It is important that from day one you seek help when you have a difficulty. Part of learning is asking questions to clarify what the lecturer or tutor has said, or asking how it would apply to your field.

9. Strive for balance

Tertiary study is for many students their first experience of living away from home. Whether you are in a share house or in residential facilities there is no longer anyone else looking out for your emotional and physical well-being. Learning how to manage these for the best is a life skill that requires some attention.

Of course an active social life and flexible time are some of the highlights of studying and you should take advantage of them. However, you need to respect your long-term goals as well as the short-term ones. Students often become sick at exam time because they are physically run down or suffering high stress because they didn't leave enough time to revise and therefore feel under-prepared.

- Eat well to stay healthy. You can't perform at your best—during exams or at any time—unless you are physically strong and healthy
- Get some physical exercise and enough sleep
- Make sure that your personal tasks do not start to fill up all your study time. This may mean making a regular weekly time for shopping, washing clothes and paying the bills
- Pay attention to your emotional needs. If you start to feel stressed, don't ignore it and hope that it goes away, ask for help from your support networks or see a counsellor

enrich your life by meeting people
from different backgrounds and
with different experiences to those
you have had

- Organise a good study space and quiet time for study. This may seem impossible in college or a residential facility. Try studying in the library, choosing a time to study when you know most people will be out or letting your friends know not to interrupt you during certain study times

10. Enjoy the experience

Studying is a great time for opening your mind to new ideas. You will be mixing with a wider variety of people than normal and you may experience new ideas, opinions and lines of reasoning. You have an opportunity to do more than just accept people's differences. By being interested in other people's opinions and reasons for these, you can enrich your tertiary learning experiences. Take the time to mix with others, explore new ideas and become increasingly confident in expressing your own ideas and opinions. Study can be a time of self-discovery as well as formal learning. Get passionate in debates and enjoy the experience!