

# Studying in Australia

## 10 tips for international students

### 1. Adjust expectations

Studying in a different country can be an incredibly exciting and rewarding experience. However, there are many adjustments to make and these take time. You will have a lot of new demands on your time so try to allow for that. In addition to study, you may be adjusting to living out of home as well as a whole new culture. For example, some students find that they need more sleep than they did at home because they get more tired. Most importantly, never assume that things are done the same way in Australia as they are done back home.

You may need to check that you understand what the expectations are by asking people to explain them, step-by-step. Ask lots of questions: in general Australians are friendly and helpful. Your own expectations may also need to be adjusted. For example, you may find that initially you don't do as well in your assessment tasks as you did back home, and that can be a shock.

It's best to see your study achievements here as a work-in-progress. Give yourself a semester to try things out and adjust. Rather than expecting the same marks you received back home, aim to improve whatever marks you receive here over a period of a year. If you can, let your parents know that the different language and expectations of studying here might cause your marks to drop initially but that you have longer term goals.

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on your time so try and allow for that.

### 2. Learn the culture

Many international students believe that it is their English language skills that most affect their ability to do well at uni. While language skills play a part, the different Australian educational culture can also cause difficulties for international students. For example, what is considered a good essay in Thailand or Japan is often completely different to what is considered a good essay in Australia. International students, whose first language is English, may also face the same problems.

A student who writes according to the tradition in their home country will not necessarily be successful here. That could be why many international students don't always get the high marks they want, but can't work out what's gone wrong as they are following all the rules that got them high marks at home. Frequently it is not until a student has their first piece of assessment returned that they realise the impact of studying in a different educational culture.

Such differences in educational culture can include:

- The roles and responsibilities of lecturers and students
- The skills you will need to complete study and assessment tasks
- The way in which you organise information and present an argument and evidence in essays.

It is very important to find out about the educational expectations in your faculty.

You can do this by:

- Asking your tutor for sample essays
- Reading the departmental guidelines
- Going to workshops run by the LLSU
- Making an individual appointment with an LLSU adviser.

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enjoy the same activities.

### 3. Build a support network

Living in a new country can be overwhelming, so it is very important to make friends who can support you while you are here. Find out if there is a University club for people from your country. Join your favourite sports or hobby club and make friends with people who enjoy the same activities. It's a good idea to try to make contact with local students too. They often know how the education system works here and can explain cultural differences to you. Sometimes your department will offer mentor or buddy schemes for new or international students. Postgraduate students will also find that there are a lot of social activities advertised through the Graduate Centre.

All these schemes are good ways to make friends. It is also very useful to build up a support network specifically for your study. This might mean introducing yourself to the person who sits next to you in lectures and suggesting a study group, visiting your tutor or going to the LLSU. Having a study group enables you to check whether you have understood the lectures properly or whether you may have missed something because of language difficulties.

You may believe that you haven't got the time to invest in social or networking activities; however, research shows that international students who develop strong support and friendship groups have a greater chance of succeeding in a foreign culture.

### 4. Find out about services

Firstly, it's important to find out about all aspects of your course. Here are some questions you might ask:

- Are your tutorials or pracs compulsory for you to attend?
- What are the assessment tasks?
- When are your tutor's consultation times?
- What is your department's penalty for late work and what are their guidelines for assignments and referencing?
- What happens if you fail an exam?
- If you are sick, or have family or personal matters, where do you apply for special consideration?

To find answers to these questions, or to talk about different problems you may face in the course of your studies, start with your course coordinator and your department. Your faculty office or website may also be of assistance, especially if they have an international student coordinator.

Secondly, find out about all the international student programs. For example, the LLSU together with the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) offer a number of programs such as academic orientation programs for international postgraduate students.

Thirdly, because you are away from home and your normal support network, it's vital to find out what student services are available to help you. Go through orientation pamphlets or look on the Student Services website to find out about them <[www.services.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au)>. For example, the LLSU offers free appointments with an adviser on any matter related to study (such as essay writing, time management, presentations, note-taking, exam preparation and critical thinking) and can also help ESL students with English grammar.

There are also international student advisers at the International Student Services (ISS). Another thing to do is to join the student union so you can take advantage of their advisory service if you feel you have been unfairly treated in your academic work. In addition to these services, there are Health, Counselling and Housing services. So ask lots of questions and take advantage of all the services available to international students and University of Melbourne students generally.

### 5. Studying independently

There are some significant differences in the responsibilities of students and teachers in Australia. In some educational cultures, the teacher is considered an expert, whose job it is to transfer particular knowledge to the student, providing them with the correct perspective or solution.

In Australia, however, the teacher is considered a more advanced colleague in the field who gives advice, but not the answers. It is not the responsibility of the teacher to ensure a student passes or fails. Just as the teacher must do their own research and develop their opinions, students should develop their own perspective and ability to present a reasoned argument, at times even disagreeing with the lecturer or tutor.



This requires different study skills – those of independent research, constructing a logical argument, evaluating other people’s arguments, being responsible for your own learning and time management and asking for feedback on your academic weaknesses. Developing these skills takes time and practice. Decide on two or three areas that you want to improve upon each semester and take the appropriate steps. Here are some strategies you can try:

- Learn how to manage your time more effectively
- Express your opinions in writing
- Make an appointment with your tutor after getting your assignment returned to discuss how you can improve
- Organise a study group to discuss assignments and lectures.

For many of you this will be the first time you have had to study without your parents being there to encourage you: think of it as a challenge, rather than a problem. Enjoy your independence!

## 7. Lecture and tutorial strategies

Always do some reading prior to the lecture as you are more likely to understand words and concepts if you already know the context. Ask the lecturer which texts are easiest to start with. During the lecture, listen carefully to signpost words such as ‘first’, ‘for example’, ‘to sum up’ and ‘consequently’. These words provide you with clues as to how the ideas link. Keep a note of new words and make regular use of a subject dictionary. Remember that local students are often also struggling with new vocabulary associated with the subject area. After the lecture, it’s useful to compare your lecture notes with a study partner to check that you have the same main points.

It is generally not a good idea to tape lectures – it takes too much time to listen to the lecture all over again! It also means you may not concentrate properly during the lecture as you know you have all the information on tape. Instead, learn to take effective notes rather than trying to write down every word the lecturer says.

In most courses, you are assessed on your participation in tutorials so although you may be nervous, it’s important to try to contribute to tutorial discussion. The purpose of tutorials is to go into the topic in some depth and discuss different ideas and points of view. It may seem that Australian students are always talking over each other and interrupting but the rules of conversation here are more relaxed than in some cultures and strong debate is encouraged. Here are some ways you can increase your participation:

- Listen to how other students disagree with their tutors and try it yourself
- Prepare some questions or a comment on something you found interesting before the class so you can demonstrate to your tutor that you understand the material
- If you have to do a presentation, watch a local student first so you can observe the way they do theirs. Make sure you prepare and rehearse. You can obtain feedback on your presentation at the LLSU.

Remember, your tutor does not have all the answers. And you are expected to have your own explanations, perspectives and opinions.

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## 6. Know your preferred learning style

It is best to study in a way that suits your personal strengths and your learning preferences. Just think for a moment – do you remember things better if you see them or say them? Do you understand diagrams better than words? If you have a visual preference then taking lecture notes and developing essay plans by using concept maps and colour would be useful. If you remember things better by listening or speaking then discussing an assignment with other students would be more useful. It’s important to use study methods that take full advantage of your individual learning preferences.

Also, give some thought to your study routines:

- Do you study the subjects you find hardest when you are most focussed and alert?
- Do you prefer to study late into the night, or are you a morning person?
- Don’t waste your peak concentration periods. Use them for reading, planning essays, writing and doing problems.
- Using the times you concentrate best to study also means you will be more productive, and as a result, will associate positive feelings of achievement with study time.



## 8. Research and reading strategies

Find out what courses are run by the various libraries – normally they run free Research Database searching courses. You can also find out about various internet and computing skills courses. When you do your research, learn to be critical of the information sources, especially those on the internet. Being critical in an academic context does not mean being negative. Rather it means evaluating the quality of the source: its authority, currency and scope.

Given the amount of literature now readily accessible to students, it is crucial that you prioritise your reading. Ask your lecturers to suggest easier texts for you to start with. When reading, it helps to keep these things in mind:

- Read with a purpose: what information do you need?
- Look for the debate – the points on which the writers disagree.
- Scan the material first by reading the title, abstract, introduction, conclusion, and then the first and last lines of each paragraph.
- Pay attention to transition and linking words that reflect the connection between ideas such as 'because', 'consequently', 'first', 'this means' etc. This will give you a context for the vocabulary and concepts that follow and allow you to select the relevant sections that require closer reading.
- Don't waste time looking up every word you don't know the meaning of. Read the whole passage and look up the words that seem central to understanding the main point.

## 9. Writing strategies

It is difficult to do really well at a writing task unless you know what is expected both in your subject/discipline, and in the Australian educational system. Ask your lecturers for examples of good and bad writing so you know what the task should look like. If they don't have any samples of student work, sometimes the LLSU or the library can help.

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For each assignment, find out how many words and references are required and whether there are any special rules. You also need to find out the appropriate academic style for the subject – you can do this by looking at the literature, the style of lectures and departmental handouts or websites. Note the format, order of information and whether subheadings or diagrams are allowed, if there is any special sort of language used, and what sort of referencing system the department uses. You can take drafts of your essays, reports or written assignments to the LLSU for feedback. The following strategies will also help:

- Write a list of academic words used to introduce arguments and evidence and note the phrases that are used to introduce ideas from other sources
- Revise any special language used in your discipline
- Gain a good overview of academic writing by enrolling in the online writing course AIRport. <<https://airport.unimelb.edu.au>>.

## 10. Referencing and plagiarism

Referencing in the Australian education culture is very important. As opposed to cultures where wisdom is passed down or learnt from authority figures such as teachers, elders or philosophers, in Australia, much more emphasis is put on each person developing their own perspective and being able to present that effectively. As a consequence, it becomes more important to identify which ideas are yours, and which come from authors you have read. Learning how to use sources correctly in your writing is a skill that will be assessed in most assignments. If you do not use references correctly you will be accused of plagiarism.

Plagiarism can take many forms:

- Using any information from a book, or journal or internet site without referencing
- Using an author's exact words without using quotation marks and referencing the page
- Writing an author's ideas in your own words but without referencing.

Knowing how to use and acknowledge sources in your writing can take a bit of practise. Find out what referencing system your department uses – for example, Harvard, APA, MLA or Chicago. A good basic guide to most faculties is available as part of the library website <<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/cite/index.html>>. When you read academic writing, pay attention to how sources are used and what language is used to distinguish between your ideas and other writer's ideas. You can always attend an LLSU workshop on referencing to improve your skills in this area.