

Tip Sheet for International Students

So here you are: in Australia, at university, in a culture that probably looks, smells and feels very different from home! Your decision to travel to Australia to study most likely involved a number of different emotional and practical challenges; how will you improve your English skills, find your way around town, learn to drive on the other side of the road, find foods that are familiar and manage being away from family and friends? Hopefully it also had a lot of positive anticipation too, and you felt excited about starting this big chapter of your life!

Academic success is often related to your emotional and psychological wellbeing, so it is important to think about how your university experience can be a fun and healthy time, as well as being academically rewarding. This tip sheet covers some common sources of stress for international students, as well as recommendations about how you can better manage them.

Homesickness

Homesickness is a very common experience for both international and domestic students; in fact, up to 70% of university students report feeling homesick at times. Homesickness can involve:

- strong feelings of longing for home/family/friends, feelings of sadness
- a desire to stay in your room and not socialise
- increased emotionality (i.e. crying a lot)
- a sense of just wanting to go home.

You can find out more information about managing the symptoms of homesickness by looking at the “Guide to Overcoming Homesickness” : <http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/homesickness-help>. Whilst these feelings can be hard to manage, they will pass as you “acclimatise”; in the meantime, try to develop a routine and make yourself get out of your room even if you don’t feel like it. The power of distraction is a helpful tool in managing homesickness!

Exam and Assessment Stress

Exams at UNE often consist of a combination of multiple choice, short answer and essay questions. As such, you will need to demonstrate flexibility with your interpretation of the course material as it will likely be more than just a memory test. In order to achieve this, practice expanding your learnt knowledge:

- start a timer and write down all the information you know about the topic without help
- complete past exam papers to get used to writing with a time constraint
- use all your senses (i.e. listening to podcasts, talking about the topic aloud, studying in a group or writing practice questions) to consolidate your learning.

If you feel very nervous before your exams, remember that moderate levels of stress are actually helpful in these situations, as it makes you more alert and focussed. Of course it is important that these stress levels don’t tip into panic, as this will have the opposite effect. Excess stress can include having:

- sweaty palms
- heart racing
- shallow breaths
- scattered thoughts
- excessively negative thinking (i.e. “I am going to fail”, “This will be a disaster”).

If you think you have excessive exam stress, consider:

- some deep breathing exercises (inhale whilst counting to 3, then exhale through your nose for another 3 counts). For more help with this, download the free app “Breathe2Relax”.
- go for a walk or do something other than study for a short period to let your body calm down.
- practice positive self-talk (i.e. “I have studied well for this exam”, “I am capable of passing”) to balance negative thoughts.

If you need more help with this, have a look at our tip sheets on the Counselling home page (<http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/counselling/tip-sheets>), or make an appointment to see a counsellor (more information about this below).

Remember that the most successful students have a balance between study and the rest of their life; it’s actually less productive to study 100% of the time than it is to ensure you are eating and sleeping well prior to your exams. Effective study is about *quality not quantity*, and this includes making your study time effective and active, and not spending hours in front of your computer getting little done.

- There are 168 hours in a week.
- It is important therefore to be realistic about what can be achieved in this time in addition to sleeping, eating and the potential for casual work (providing casual work is permitted in your visa or scholarship rules).
- Generally it is recommended that you allow 12 hours a week per unit of study, which includes attending lectures and working on assignments.
- As an international student, you may also have to allow time for translation of content, using dictionaries and extra time for reading English texts, so be realistic about what you can achieve each day.
- It is better to set achievable goals and have extra time for other things, than to set goals that are too difficult and result in failure and self-criticism.

It can be difficult to receive criticism on work you have written, particularly if you have put a lot of time and effort into it. The goal of feedback is not only to grade your work, but is also designed to develop your academic skills. It’s important to keep in mind that this is not personal but rather a part of academia. If you don’t feel there has been enough information provided, consider getting in touch with the unit coordinator to ask for more feedback.

Remember too that failing something, whilst this can be disappointing, is not the end of the world or all that uncommon (it happens just as much to domestic students) and can often be turned into a positive learning opportunity to look at improving your skills.

General Study Skills

University study in Australia requires students to be independent, self-directed, critical thinkers. This means:

- Ensuring you understand the assessment question. If you get stuck with this, consider brainstorming the topic and developing an essay plan (a guide with suggested paragraph topics and research to refer to).
- Having effective time management skills, which can be developed by using a study timetable.
- Writing in a way that takes the reader on a journey, from a general introduction of the topic, to an analysis of the available research, to finishing with a compelling argument about why you have a certain opinion.
- Clarifying any questions that don’t make sense or need more detailed explanation. It is ok to say you don’t understand and be assertive if you require more assistance; this is particularly important if you are studying at a post-graduate level.

- Submitting work and attending meetings in a timely and respectful way.
- For more on with these skills, don't be afraid to ask for help such as from the Academic Skills Office.

Lecturers encourage open communication with their students, so you are welcome to respectfully approach them with a question or enquiry. UNE staff members are unable to accept valuable gifts from students so don't be offended if they decline such an offer; if they were to accept, it could be considered a bribe to give you an unfair advantage over other students. Saying or writing "thankyou" in written correspondence is a more appropriate way to demonstrate your appreciation; this is polite particularly if they have provided extra assistance to you.

Unlike some other cultures, Australian university students are encouraged to intellectually dissect their presented materials and this means being able to articulately present a critical review of information. Lecturers usually welcome work that presents a considered and empirically-backed alternate opinion, even if this is different to their own!

You may be inspired by aspects of research you read, however it is considered disrespectful in Australia to copy, or plagiarise, this material as your own work. You can of course comment on others work, however this must be appropriately referenced. For more information on how to avoid plagiarism, you can do a short workshop with the Academic Skills Office (<http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/resources/academic-skills/workshops-and-courses>).

What is Counselling?

UNE recognises that university can be stressful, particularly for International Students. It offers a range of support services to assist students to engage fully with their education, and address any of the emotional stressors that can go alongside this.

UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is a team of registered psychologists who offer free, face to face or on the phone counselling sessions to current students. Counsellors in our service are trained professionals who have a strong knowledge of the university system. They are also independent of your friend and family network and so can offer impartial advice.

The student will make an appointment to see a counsellor by calling our receptionist on **6773 2897**, at which point they will be asked if they would prefer to see a male or female psychologist (this can sometimes be important for cultural reasons). The psychologist will then meet with the student on their own (or with a support person if necessary) and speak about the student's concerns, provide advice and practical recommendations.

Students often speak with the psychologists about issues such as homesickness, improving their study skills (i.e. reducing procrastination, increasing concentration and memory), feelings of ongoing sadness or anxiety, or relationship problems. These concerns are normal and are often experienced by domestic students as well. We encourage all students to ask for help early on, so the problems don't become overwhelming and interrupt your ability to achieve at university. In Australia, it is considered *normal* and *healthy* to ask for help from a psychologist or doctor and so please don't struggle on your own if you are feeling isolated or upset.

This service is confidential, meaning that the issues discussed are kept private from family, lecturers or friends. The only time this changes is if the psychologist is worried that you or others might be a risk of getting hurt, however the psychologist would discuss with you who can be told in order to create safety for everyone.

Please call UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services on (02) 6773 2897 if you would like further assistance.

The support you need to succeed