

# **Advice for students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education**

## **Who should use this guide?**

This guide provides a brief overview of the practices of assessment of learning in Australian universities. The information, suggestions and advice that follow will be especially useful if you are an international student who has little or no experience of the Australian university system. It will also be useful if you have had experience of assessment methods that are very different from Australian university practices, either at high school or university in another country.

## **Typical Australian university assessment**

### **What is assessment?**

Most subjects (sometimes called ‘units of study’ or ‘courses’) will have a number of assessment tasks (often called ‘assessments’) that you will undertake across the semester. Assessment tasks vary widely and may include essays; reports; written assignments; oral presentations; examinations; performances and/or artistic work; as well as class participation and contributions to group work with fellow students.

Each assessment task you undertake is marked and graded by a member of staff, who may or may not be the principal lecturer in the subject. Usually, you will be informed of the grade you receive and you may also get some other feedback on your work. Your marks or grades for each assessment are then used to work out your final mark and grade for the subject. See the section ‘How do you know how well you are doing?’ for more information about feedback.

### **How important is assessment?**

Assessment is the main way that your progress in your course is documented and it is a central part of university education in Australia. Each assessment task is worth a proportion or percentage of your final grade for a subject. It is usually the case that the higher the proportion or percentage, the more work required to complete the assessment successfully.

Each piece of assessment you are required to hand in will also have a ‘due date’, which is the last date it can be handed in. It is very important that you submit assessments on time, as there are usually penalties for lateness. If you have had personal or other problems that have affected your ability to complete assessments, you must let the person marking your work, or your tutor or lecturer, know about these as soon as possible. It is useful to have evidence of problems (for example, a doctor’s certificate if you have been ill) to help you negotiate either more time to do the assessment, or an alternative assessment task.

## What should I do first?

### *Find out what's required*

It is important to start by spending some time carefully reading the assessment requirements for each subject. Ask your tutor or lecturer to explain anything that is not clear. Often, a number of assessment tasks from different subjects are due around the same time and you might find that there are periods in the semester when your workload is very heavy. Plan ahead and make sure you start your assignments and study for exams as early as possible. Don't wait for the lecturer or tutor to give you examples of examination questions and answers in advance – usually they will not do this and will be expecting you to find information for yourself.

### *Get help*

Australian universities have services and resources to help local and international students improve various aspects of their study and learning. Ensure you learn how to use the library — university libraries usually run orientation and skills programs — and seek help from language and learning support services. Find out what language or learning services are available as soon as you can and make use of the on-line and print resources, workshops, group programs or individual appointments available. The sooner you access help, the sooner your learning will benefit.

## Five particular assessment challenges for international students

There are five assessment-related challenges that many international students experience in Australian universities, particularly those familiar with different educational expectations and conventions. Each is explained below along with some suggestions for how to manage each challenge.

### 1. Unintentional cheating

One of the most common issues for international students in relation to assessment in Australian universities is unintentional cheating through what is called 'plagiarism'. Put simply, plagiarism is when a student uses the ideas, work or words of someone else, without properly acknowledging where these ideas, work or words came from. In Australian universities, to use the ideas of others without acknowledgment is considered to be cheating and universities view such action very seriously.

For a student with experience of different educational practices it is sometimes easy to 'cheat' without realising you are doing so. After all, in some educational settings, the more closely a student can replicate the work or words of a master or expert in a field, the better the student is considered to be. For example, a student in such a setting who can, in exam conditions, recite word-for-word the teachings of a particular scholar is likely to be well rewarded with high marks — this is not the case in Australia. Similarly, in such a setting, a student who can faithfully repeat the words and ideas of a scholar in their written assignments outside exams will also be well regarded and considered to be an excellent student — once again, this is usually not the case in Australia.

Australian university assessment practices value and reward students for using the words and ideas of scholars, but only if they are used in two particular ways. These two ways are outlined below.

### ***'Quoting': Using the precise words of someone else to support your ideas***

One of the ways students are encouraged to use the ideas of masters, experts and/or scholars in their field is to use the precise words of the scholar to support the student's own ideas or to emphasise a point the student is making. Sometimes when you wish to refer to the work of another person, it is best to use the precise words of that person. When you do this you are expected to acknowledge that someone else wrote the words you have used.

### ***'Paraphrasing': Reporting the ideas of someone else in your own words***

At other times you may not wish to include the precise words used by another person but you do wish to report that person's ideas. So a second way that Australian university students are encouraged to use the ideas of experts is to summarise the ideas of these scholars in the student's own words. For example, a student at an Australian university who can, in answer to a relevant exam question, write a summary of the ideas of a particular scholar in a way that clearly shows the student's understanding of the ideas, is likely to be rewarded with high marks. When you summarise the main ideas you have learned from someone else in your own words, you are also expected to clearly acknowledge that someone else first wrote the ideas you have summarised.

### ***How do I acknowledge I have used someone else's work or ideas?***

In the case of both quoting and paraphrasing, there are rules for how to acknowledge where the words and ideas you have used have come from; in other words, there are rules for how to acknowledge the original authorship.

***It is essential to consult with your teachers about the exact rules for acknowledgment of authorship required in your subjects.***

The rules for acknowledgment are referred to most often as the rules of 'Referencing' or 'Citation'. The rules are quite complex and they must be followed closely. Unfortunately, there are a number of different sets of rules that are used in different circumstances and this can create some confusion. However, the two main methods of acknowledging the ideas of others are:

- The Harvard or in-text system and
- The Cambridge or footnote or endnote system.

Your teachers should provide you with specific details of the particular method and rules they expect you to use. If they do not, you may ask them which method they would prefer you to use. If necessary, you can ask at your university library, learning/academic/study skills services or the international office for the rules of each method.

### ***Why do I have to use these complicated methods and rules?***

One of the central purposes of Australian higher education is to produce graduates who are independent thinkers, able to critically analyse information and ideas. This means that during your time at university in Australia you will be asked not just to become familiar with the ideas of scholars and experts but to examine these ideas closely and to decide how much or how little you agree with them. You will learn to form opinions about ideas and to communicate these opinions verbally and in writing. These opinions must be based on evidence and one common source of evidence is the ideas of others. You are likely to find yourself using the ideas of one scholar to analyse and perhaps criticise the ideas of another. This is considered excellent scholarly practice in Australia.

There are two reasons, then, why Australian university students are expected to acknowledge the source or origin of the words of scholars they use in their assessment tasks. The first is that you need to let readers know where you found your ideas so that they can check to see they are reliable and valid ideas for the point you are making. Secondly, you need to make it clear which ideas are yours and which are those of others.

***It is essential for your success as a student in an Australian university that you learn how to correctly use the words and ideas of others in your own work.***

## 2. Tutorial participation

Part of your assessment and marks for a subject may come from participation in class or tutorials. Even if class participation is not assessed, it is likely you will be expected to participate in discussions.

Some international students find it difficult to participate in class discussions. Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESBs), for instance, may not be confident in their spoken language ability and may feel shy about speaking in public, especially in front of native speakers. If this is the case for you, remember that Australian staff and students are accustomed to hearing students from a wide range of backgrounds speaking in class. Try not to be nervous. Speak slowly and clearly. And remember too that your English language ability will improve as you practise.

Other international students do not feel shy about speaking, but are unsure of the 'rules' of how to take turns in a group discussion or may feel hesitant to 'interrupt' another speaker. If this is the case for you, watch local students carefully to see how they show that they would like a turn or how they 'interrupt politely'. Copy what the successful contributors do. You will notice that they time their contribution carefully so that it comes just as someone else has finished speaking. You might notice that just before they speak, they raise one finger or their eyebrows, or take a breath, to indicate to the discussion leader and the other students that they would like a turn. They may even raise their hand. Start by practising 'polite interruptions' on your own or with friends, and then first try contributing in the class where you feel most comfortable. Once you have begun participating, you will find it gets easier.

### 3. Group work

Group work is very popular in some courses in Australian universities. Some international (and local) students find this type of assessment confusing at times but the simple suggestions below are likely to help you avoid confusion and problems:

- Try to choose a group where there are Australian students – they are likely to be more familiar with the requirements of group work and this will help you
- Read the assessment requirements very carefully – ask your tutor or lecturer if you are not sure exactly what you have to do
- Be sure to ask your group members questions if you are not sure about your role in the group – for example, “I’m very keen to be involved, what can I do?” or “How can I help get this assignment done?”
- Make sure you arrive on time to all group meetings and contribute fairly to the work of the group
- Ensure that you do the work you say you will do – if you are having trouble, ask for help as soon as possible
- If you have to write an individual report, check that you understand the requirements clearly and ask someone to read and comment on a draft of your report
- Make sure you hand your work in on time.

### 4. Communicating in Australian English

Some international students find that even though they have high scores on IELTS or TOEFL or other English language tests, when they get to Australia they have difficulty understanding some spoken and written language. It often takes some time to adjust to a different accent and use of English, as well as to Australian idioms. Try to read as much as you can in English, including newspapers and magazines as well as your academic texts. You might also find it helpful to listen to the radio or television or to conversations around campus or home to familiarise yourself with the way English is used in Australia. Speaking is also helpful in developing your skills — practise by having conversations wherever possible, asking questions in class and participating in tutorial discussions.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help with your written language. Many local students from English speaking backgrounds need and seek help with problems with their own written language skills. The way in which assignments are written in Australian universities may differ significantly from the way in which you are accustomed to writing. Plan to write several drafts of your assignments, leaving plenty of time to review and edit them.

## 5. Oral presentations

Many international (and local) students find oral presentations – presenting a talk or paper in front of the class – a difficult thing to do. Make sure you collect as much information as possible on what is required from you in the presentation (for example, for how long should you speak, whether you are required to use presentation aids or props and whether you need to prepare questions to ask the audience). Try also to collect as much information as possible on how your presentation will be marked (for example, the criteria of a good presentation and how much each criterion is worth).

The key to doing well in oral presentations is to prepare carefully and thoroughly and as part of this preparation, to practise. Once you have completed your research and decided on the material you will present, it is critical that you practise your presentation. Practise aloud, with any aids you intend to use, such as an overhead projector or a whiteboard. If it is not possible to have access to a room with such aids, any room will do and you can pretend to change transparencies and/or write on the board. Planning and practising at what points you will change the transparency or write something on the board during your presentation is an important part of your preparation. Do this by yourself or, if possible, in front of a small group of friends and ask them to give you feedback. You can do the same for your friends. Time your presentation to make sure it does not take longer than the allocated time (remember that it takes longer to say something aloud than to read it silently).

### How will you know how well you are doing?

Many international (and local) students find the grades given for pieces of work and for whole subjects different to what they may have experienced elsewhere. Specifically, you may notice that the names of the grades are different to those you may have seen before. The names vary across universities in Australia, with some awarding, for example, 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D' and 'E', with others awarding, for example, 'High Distinction', 'Distinction', 'Credit', 'Pass', 'Fail' to refer to similar levels of achievement.

Each university in Australia has its own policy on grading practices and has explanations for each of the grades that students can receive for a piece of work or a subject. These policies are usually available on the university website. If you have trouble finding them, ask the student union or international office for help.

When you get your assignment, test or exam back, check carefully for marks, comments or other feedback that your tutor or lecturer may have provided. If it is possible to make an appointment to see your tutor or lecturer for more detailed feedback, do so as soon as possible. Listen carefully to what they tell you about your work. Use this feedback to improve future assignments/exams either in that subject if possible, or in future subjects.

Try not to become disheartened if you do not do as well as you thought you might have. Many local and international students take time to adjust to the requirements of assessment in universities in Australia. Many do not get perfect or very high marks for assignments and exams, even when they may have done so in other educational settings. Remember that the important thing is to keep trying to improve as you learn more about assessment practices and about your course material.

### Recommended reading

De Fazio, T. (1999) *Studying in Australia: A guide for international students*. Allen and Unwin, St Leonards.