

# TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

This is an updated version of the materials developed by the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University. This material appears on the Neurodiversity Hub under a licensing agreement with OTARC.

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# STUDENTS

This information pertains to supporting autistic students in academic settings and comes from a variety of sources including local and international information, peer reviewed research and research conducted at OTARC, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia (funded by DHS, Victoria).

Please note, while this information is designed to support autistic students, a lot of the information and resources also apply to students with other neurodiverse variations.

We use 'university' as a generic term referring to tertiary providers including universities, colleges and vocational training providers (and, per Australia: TAFEs).

## **Have you been diagnosed with autism?**

The following information will help you in your journey at university. It is important to realize that going to

university is a challenge for everyone and everyone needs support. The information in this section will help you thrive at university.

The information provided is general and not targeted for specific tertiary institutions. For specific information regarding policies and student support services at individual tertiary institutions, please visit their website or contact them directly.

# TRANSITION AND ORIENTATION

## Key Points

**1** Speak to someone in the disability or accessibility support unit at your university, before you arrive on campus. You will learn about the different support services offered at your institution and what you need to do before you arrive on campus.

**2** Register for courses before classes begin. Make sure you know what day registration opens and closes. It is also recommended to talk with your course/ faculty advisor to discuss what subjects you should take.

**3** Attend "Open days" or "Accepted Student's Day" to learn more about the university and what is offered.

**4** Familiarize yourself with the campus, before classes begin. Check to see if your university is on the app, "Lost On Campus."

**5** Attend orientation events! You will learn more about what is offered at the university and how to get involved. This is also a great opportunity to meet people and join clubs that interest you.

Whether you are returning to study after a break or continuing straight after high school, commencing further education can be very exciting, but also daunting at the same time.

### Preparing for further education

Well done if you have been accepted to study at a university! If you have not yet applied for a tertiary course, you are doing very well by coming to this site and starting your preparation early!

### What can I do to prepare for university?

There are a number of other things you can do to help you prepare. These include:

- Speaking to someone from the disability/ accessibility support unit at your university about your autism diagnosis before classes begin. The disability/ accessibility support unit can provide you with tailored support for your specific learning needs.
- Attending university and open days.
- Checking the campus map on the university website.
- Joining in the orientation activities, especially activities that tell you about using the library, accessing the computer system, or any special services that are available.

- Registering for subjects (courses) prior to the first day of class.
- Visiting the campus and familiarising yourself with its layout (e.g. library, classrooms, lecture theatres, cafés).
- Attending transition/bridging courses if they are offered by your university.
- Talking to family members about tertiary education.
- Finding out how to get to university (by public transport or driving) and practicing getting there
- Attend orientation events during orientation week which also involves various social interactions.
- Check your university website or the student portal within their website for more information on upcoming orientation events. If your course or department offers orientation activities or sessions, it's a great idea to attend. It is highly recommended that you speak to someone from the disability/ accessibility support unit at your university before or during orientation about what they can do to help you succeed in your education.

## Orientation

Orientation is an important period for first time university students to get familiar with the campus environment, the student services, and fellow students. However, it can sometimes also be quite stressful and overwhelming.

During orientation, you have to:

- enrol into your course (program)
- take care of logistical items such as subject (course) selection and student cards
- register for access to university online systems

## Glossary of tertiary study words

**Assessment:** A piece of work which is marked or graded. Assessment can take a variety of forms including written assignments (essays or reports), examinations, laboratory work, oral presentations, and practical assignments. Attendance at some classes may be required as part of the assessment: check this as soon as possible after you commence study.

**Attendance:** Records of attendance are maintained by teaching departments and may impact upon a student's successful completion or even be a compulsory requirement.

**College vs School:** Within many Australian universities, there are colleges and schools. For example, at La Trobe University, the Department of Psychology & Counselling is in the School of Psychology and Health Sciences, which is within the College of Science, Health and Engineering.

**Contact hours or contact time:** The number of hours per week a student spends in class (classes include

Tutorials, lectures, workshops and practical sessions).

**Course:** Depending on the university, course could mean one of two things: 1) the degree or diploma you are enrolled in or 2) another name for subject.

**Credit:** Recognition of prior learning granted towards an academic program.

**Elective:** A subject that is chosen according to your interests, or a non-compulsory subject. Some restrictions may apply to what electives you can select.

**Faculty:** An organisational division within a university (e.g. Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Science) covering a particular area of study.

**Lecture:** A lecture is a formal presentation by an academic staff member at university, usually to a large number of students. Lectures may include the use of handouts and audio-visual presentations. Opportunities for asking questions or discussing the material being presented are usually limited.

**Program:** Another word for 'course' or 'degree'. Some tertiary institutions may use program.

**Statement of results:** A formal record of your academic results recorded against your module.

**Subject:** A subject is a particular area of study. For example, Accounting 101, Biology 101. However, some universities may use the word 'course' or 'unit' instead of 'subject'.

**Swot vac:** In university, swot vac is the free time before exams when there are no classes scheduled, which enables students to prepare for exams.

**Tutorial:** A tutorial is a learning opportunity in which students discuss the key topics, concepts and ideas of the course with their tutors. Tutorials are closely linked to assessment and often involve small group discussions and group work. All students are expected to prepare for tutorials by reading required material and preparing questions and/ or answers to questions. Students are also expected to participate actively in class discussions and small group activities. Tutorials often complement the lectures given for a course and usually run for one or two hours.

# DISCLOSURE OF AUTISM DIAGNOSIS

## KEY POINTS

1

Consider disclosing your diagnosis to the university. It is the only way you will be able to access the resources and services available to you.

2

There is legislation that gives you rights to access support services to help you reach your full academic potential.

3

Disclosing you are autistic to your university allows staff to provide support tailored to your needs. Registering with the university is not just about academic study accommodations, it is also an opportunity to participate in specific employability initiatives that many universities now offer to assist students in thinking about the world of work and their time after university.

4

Remember that disclosure is a personal choice. It is important to understand that disclosing to your university will allow you to access support services.

Letting your university know about your autism diagnosis can be a good idea, despite any initial concerns you may have.

### **I have not disclosed**

You may have your own reasons for not disclosing your are autistic to your university. It might be because you fear you may be alienated or judged.

### **It is your right to have additional help if you need it**

Australia has legislation that states the obligations of universities to ensure that students with disabilities and autism are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as those without disability. So you have certain rights to access additional support services to help you achieve your educational goals.

## Benefits of disclosure

The key benefit of disclosing you are autistic to your university is that staff can provide you with tailored support. That is, staff can work with you to help you succeed in whatever course (program) you are studying.

Disability support staff can help you with issues such as:

- time tables
- choosing subjects (courses)
- time management skills
- special arrangements for exams such as a separate room or use of a computer
- extensions for assignments
- lecture/ classroom aids
- note taking for classes.

Disability/ accessibility support staff can also link you to other support services such as counselling and the academic skills unit.

## Should I disclose?

Disclosure is a personal choice – you are not obliged to disclose your disability. However, if you choose not to do so, staff at your university may not be able to meet your specific

needs, as they will not know what your needs are.

If you are doing very well at university and do not want to disclose, then disclosure may not be necessary. However, if you are struggling with your studies and finding it difficult to complete your subjects (courses), you may want to consider seeking help.

## How do I disclose and get help?

To get additional support, you can either speak to your teacher/ lecturer or contact the disability/ accessibility support unit at your university. Please note that to receive reasonable adjustments and accommodations, disclosure at university requires documentation of your diagnosis. You should bring whatever documentation you had in high school or any medical documentation you might have. For more information about this, you should contact the disability/ accessibility support unit at your university to find out more about the process and what exactly is required. Sometimes parents can provide extra support, but they cannot speak to the



staff at your university about you without your permission. Thus, you can invite your parent(s) to a meeting with your teacher/ lecturer or disability/ accessibility staff. And you can give the staff permission to contact your parents should they need to.

# WHAT TO EXPECT AT UNIVERSITY

## Key Points

**1** At university, it is on your own initiative to complete your work and study for your courses. You will also experience more independence than you did in high school. It is important to learn how to effectively manage your time.

**2** If you are feeling depressed, anxious, stressed, or struggling with other personal matters, be sure to contact the counseling centre (name may differ at your university) at your university. The different resources and services offered may help you get back on track and feel your best.

**3** Talk to someone in the Disability/ Accessibility Support Unit (name may differ at your university) at your university. It is important to communicate your learning needs with them, so they can best support you.

**4** Contact the Career Services Centre (name may differ at your university) at your university to start thinking about what careers might interest you. The center may also be able to help you with interview preparation, resumes, cover letters, and CV's.

Universities are great places to be, however there are many differences between high school and university. Becoming aware of the differences can help you manage your expectations.

Every university provides support and services to their students. These services are available to ALL students. You are no different to any other student who needs help, so do not be afraid to find out what services and supports are provided by your university and ask them for help when you need it.

### **Academic and learning skills**

People at the academic and learning skills unit will be able to help you to develop studying and learning skills. They can provide you with tips on how to: organise your study and time management, write essays and reports, understand your assignment tasks, arrange the reference lists and bibliographies, read efficiently and effectively, improve your language and literacy skills.

**NOTE:** The actual name of this Student Support Unit may be different at your university. If you need help with any of these studying and learning skills, go to your university website to check

which unit provides these services. Email or go and see them.

## **Counselling**

We all experience difficult and confusing times in our lives. Your university may provide a free counselling service for all students. The information you provide in the counselling sessions is treated as confidential, which means your teachers and other students will not know about anything you say in the sessions.

The types of issues students frequently discuss with counsellors are: anxiety and depression, study-related issues, difficulties in relationships with other people, questions of identity, self-esteem and confidence, loss and trauma. If you experience any of these issues and would like to speak to someone, go to your university website to find out where the counselling unit is located and who you can contact to set up an appointment.

## **Careers and employment**

It is important for every student to start thinking about their plan for a career early on during their studies. Some questions you can ask yourself are:

- What would I like to do after I finish my course?
- What area interests me?
- What kind of job can I imagine myself doing?
- What do I need to do to get to my preferred job?

Your institution's careers and employment unit can help you with answering these questions. They can also help you with job searching, résumé writing, and preparation for interviews.

## **Disability/ Accessibility support unit**

Disability/ Accessibility support units provide services to empower students with a disability to become independent learners, including autistic students. This support can be tailored to your specific learning needs. If you have an autism diagnosis, it is important to talk to a disability/ accessibility advisor as early as

possible to discuss supports you may require. It is best to do this before you start the semester to ensure you are not unfairly disadvantaged in your learning by any special needs you may have.

Examples of things disability advisors can help you with include:

provide a note taker for taking class notes, use a computer for exams instead of paper and pen, allow you to complete exams in a separate room provide extensions for assignments adapt your learning environment to reduce noise and other stimuli.

If you have already contacted the disability/ accessibility support unit at your university and you are working with a disability/accessibility advisor to provide you with the support you need, then that is ideal. You have completed the first important task which will ensure you get the best support available.

NOTE: The name of the disability/ accessibility support unit may be different for every university. Go to your university's website to check which unit provides disability

support services. Email them or go and see them.

## **Other services**

Your university may provide other services such as: clubs and societies, financial support, housing or accommodation.

## **High school vs university**

In high school, you start your day around 9 am, go to all your classes, and finish around 3.30 pm. Class sizes tend to be small, around 20 to 30 students. Teachers usually tell you what you have to learn, give you lots of directions, and you have lots of interactions with your teachers.

## **University**

At universities, there is not the same daily routine or relationship with your teachers. Some days you might study all day. On other days you might study for only part of the day, or may not even have to attend classes at all, but you will be expected to do a lot of work outside class times. The amount of time you spend at university can also depend on the course (program) you are enrolled in. For example, if you do

a science course you may have practical laboratory classes to attend as well as lectures and tutorials.

## **University lectures**

In universities, some lectures may have hundreds of students. Unlike high school, attendance at university lectures is generally not compulsory; that is, the lecturers will not mark the roll at the start of each class. However, it is highly recommended that you do attend all your lectures to help you learn the lecture content and to keep connected with the course. If you miss classes it can be very difficult to catch up.

## **Tutorials and laboratory classes**

Attendance at tutorials and laboratory classes may be compulsory, which means you will be expected to attend the tutorial or laboratory class for which you are enrolled.

Tutorials are an important part of the learning process and bring together smaller groups of students to discuss material presented in the lectures. Check your subject (course) outline in your subject (course) guide. Subject course guides can generally be found online on your university website. If you

are unsure, speak with your lecturer, teacher, or tutor to make sure you understand the attendance requirements for your classes.

## **Independent Learning**

Learning at university is different from learning at high school. As a tertiary student, you have to learn to become more independent in your studies. You are expected to manage your study timetable and deadlines. This may include: Preparing for classes before they start by reading class notes, textbooks and other recommended materials, Finding your own resources for completing your assignments from the library or internet, Making sure you complete and submit assignments on or before their due date, Making your own study plan can help you organise your time.

If you experience difficulties with your subject (course), do not be afraid to ask your teachers for help. There are a range of support services available at your university to assist you.

## **Online resources**

Many subjects, units, courses or programs use online resources. These include: subject (course) notes, lecture/ class notes, Lecture/ class presentations, handouts and other reading materials, audio recordings of classes or lectures (you can listen to classes or lectures online if you were unable to attend), video recordings of classes or lectures (you can watch classes or lectures online if you were unable to attend), class discussion boards, blogs, links to readings held in the library, links to related websites and online articles. Most universities have their own online systems for accessing these resources. Please check with your university to find out what system is used and how to log in before the first class. If you have trouble accessing course notes or lecture notes, check with your lecturer, teacher, or tutor.

## **Assessments**

Assessments usually take the form of essays, individual or group assignments, laboratory reports, take-home exams, formal exams, and individual or group oral presentations.

Each subject (course) may have very different forms of assessment.

## **Library**

The library should become a resource that you use for many of your study needs. You can usually find a quiet area in the library or other study area to complete some study or simply to relax. The library is quite large and borrowing books can be a stressful process for many students. If you find it difficult to borrow books or find the resources (both online and offline), you can speak to one of the librarians at the library's help desk. Most libraries have special tours or introductory classes during orientation week. Things like checking the catalogue, requesting books that are on loan, and checking due dates on books you have borrowed can be done online.

## **Services and Facilities**

There is a wide range of services and facilities available at universities including cafés, restaurants, markets, and gyms. To find out what is available on your campus, visit your university website.

# LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY

## Key Points

1

Classes at university differ from your classes in high school. While some of your classes at university may be small, you may also have a lecture with many students in a large lecture hall.

2

At university, you will most likely not have classes all day, like you did in high school. It is important to manage your time and plan out when you have assignments due and exams scheduled.

3

In addition to class and lectures, you may also have practical laboratory sessions, tutorials, or discussion sections. These will most likely be a smaller group of students, than in the regular lecture, and occur at a separate time and different location than the lecture.

4

Attend office hours or make an appointment with your professor, lecturer, or tutor as soon as you have questions. It is best to understand the academic material early, as it often builds on itself and you can end up getting behind in your studies and it is then often hard to catch-up.

Learning at university is different from learning at high school. If you become aware of these differences, this will help you prepare for the learning environment at your university.

The chart on the following page outlines the differences between learning at high school and tertiary institutions

Secondary	Tertiary
Guided homework tasks to assist learning.	Self-directed revision throughout semester. Need to set your own homework.
Study time is often structured by the teacher.	Need to manage your own time.
Study tasks are fairly evenly spread throughout the year.	May have many assessments (such as assignments and exams) due at the same time.
Concepts are often simpler.	Concepts are often more challenging to understand.
Writing tasks may not require in-text references and reference lists.	In-text references and reference lists required for most writing (Check your university's/s website for the specific rules for referencing).
Smaller amounts of directed reading.	Extensive reading of text books and journal articles required and need to critically evaluate what you read.
Less emphasis on online materials.	Online systems used to communicate important information, for example, lecture notes, assessment information.
Easy to ask for help from teachers.	Help is available, but you need to know who to ask or where to look online.

## Learning about learning

Learning is not simply remembering and memorising what is taught by your teachers and lecturers. At university, you will need to develop higher order thinking skills.

Many assessment tasks will require you to go beyond simply remembering and repeating information. You may be asked to apply what you have learnt to new situations or to analyse and evaluate information. This could mean analysing a writer's arguments and evidence and making judgements about them (evaluating). The highest level thinking skill is creating. This refers to the creation of new knowledge that has never been known before. This is a skill that is

normally developed at postgraduate level. Need help to develop studying and learning skills? The academic and learning skills unit at your university should be able to assist you.

## Suggestions for studying

Some general tips for studying:

- Plan ahead for all your studies. Remember the 5 Ps: Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance!
- Go to ALL classes, lectures, tutorials, or laboratory/practical classes.
- Making a start early can make all the difference, including readings, assignments, and essays.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. It is important to get the help you



need. You can get help from the teachers/ lecturers and other support units. If you have questions about the class material, make an appointment with your teacher/ lecturer. If you have questions about the tutorial or laboratory material, ask the tutors and teachers during class.

- Treat your studies like a full-time job.

## **Organise your studies**

Tips for organising your studies:

- Check out the teaching/ lecture and study rooms before the semester begins. This will allow you to see where they are located and you can also choose the best position to sit in the classrooms (for comfort or in order to reduce the level of distraction).
- Make sure you understand the subject (course) outline. The subject outline is usually provided to you before or during the first lecture.
- Make a list of what assessments or assignments have to be done in order of the date they are due.

You can also add the percentage value the assessments are worth. For assessments worth smaller percentage values, you may want to spend less time working on them. For assessments worth larger percentage values, you may want to spend more time. For example, you would want to spend more time on an assignment that is worth 50 per cent compared to an assignment that is worth 5 per cent.

- Set out a study schedule
- You should prepare for classes/ lectures by downloading the class notes and readings and completing them before class.
- Do any further study such as revisions immediately after the class/ lecture. For example, if you had class during the day, you can revise the class notes in the evening of the same day.
- Confirm with teachers/ lecturers the concepts that you are trying to learn by setting up a time to speak to them or email them your questions.
- Get assessments in on time, even if you are worried about them not being perfect.

## Making a study plan

A study plan is not something to be left until exam time. To be successful at university, you need to study consistently throughout the semester, right from the first week. This study time is additional to the time you spend on assessment tasks.

It is strongly recommended that you spend at least one hour studying and completing assessment tasks for every one hour of contact time at university. For example, if you have eight hours of classes per week, you should spend at least eight hours a week on additional study and assessment tasks.

## Organising your time

A semester planner is a good way to start. It's a good idea to make a big one to put up on your wall. You can also put this information in your diary or calendar if you use one for university. A timetable can be useful to organise when to study. You will also need to make time to study in the evenings. Don't forget to plan some recreation time too!

## 'To do' lists

A 'to do' list can be useful to organise what to study. Below is an example of a Week 3 to do list.

Week 3 'to do' list

History101:

- Read lecture 5 readings (text book) before the lecture and write summaries (2 hours)
- Revise lecture 5 notes and write summaries (1 hour)

Science101:

- Read chapter 7 of text book and write summaries (2 hours)
- Write the results section for lab report (2 hours)

## Be realistic!

It is important to be realistic. Don't set impossible goals for yourself. Here are a few things to consider:

Allow for the limitations of your attention span. Avoid scheduling large slabs of time for one subject (course). Alternating subjects for study will help you to sustain your concentration and interest. For example, study history for two hours and then study science for

another two hours, instead of studying history for four hours straight.

Remember to take occasional breaks between your studies.

Work in terms of tasks, not time.

Rather than having a vague aim to 'study biology for two hours', set a particular section of work for each study period. A sense of achievement comes from successfully completing small tasks, and breaking the work up into smaller sections makes the whole process of study seem less daunting.

For example, if you plan to study a subject (course) for two hours, identify the tasks you want to do during those two hours.

- For lecture study, it could be: read lecture 5, write summary of lecture, and complete the text book readings for lecture 6.
- For essay writing, it could be: do research for essay and write the structure for the essay.

Review your approach. If your study plan is not working effectively,

review your strategies and consider making changes.

For example, you may have attempted to fit too much into your timetable, or your timetable may not be flexible enough to accommodate unexpected events. Some minor adjustments may be all you need to stay on track.

Make sure you include some recreation time. Having fun and relaxing is important! If you allocate time for recreational activity, you will be less tempted to throw it all in and waste time avoiding study. Consider joining clubs and activities on campus that align with your interests. Clubs can be a great place to make friends and meet people with similar interests as you. Physical activity is also very important and can help reduce stress and anxiety levels. Many campuses have club sports and gyms you can join. Working out can be a great study break! For example, a thirty minute walking break might be what you need to refocus and stay productive!

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## Websites

Autism help. Adult Files. [Retrieved 21 April 2016; PDF 3.3 MB]

Elliott, T., & Wilson, C. (2008). Thinking about higher education? Tips from students with dyslexia, mental health difficulties and Asperger's Syndrome. [Retrieved 21 April 2016]

University of Melbourne. (2009). Towards success in tertiary study Asperger's Syndrome. [Retrieved 23 July 2012; PDF 53.5 KB]

National Disability Coordination Officer Program. (2015). [Retrieved 7 April 2016]

National Disability Coordination Officer Program (2015). How to transition to tertiary education: Helpful hints for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. [Retrieved 7 April 2016]

National Disability Coordination Officer Program. (2012). Preparing for higher education: A Victorian guide for students with a disability [PDF 3.16 MB]. [Retrieved 20 September 2012]

National Disability Coordination Officer Program. (2012). Preparing for : A guide for students with a disability in Victoria [PDF 2 MB]. [Retrieved 7 April 2016]

National Disability Coordination Officer Program, South Western and Western Sydney. Get ready for work and study: Top tips for students

with disabilities and carers. [Retrieved 7 April 2016]

Stairway to STEM. Resources for autistic students / students on the autism spectrum transitioning from high school to college, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields.

[Retrieved 23 April 2019]

## **Books**

Edmonds, G. & Worton, D. (2006). *The Asperger social guide: How to relate with confidence to anyone in any social situation as an adult with Asperger's Syndrome*. London, UK: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Harpur, J., Lawlor, M., & Fitzgerald, M. (2004). *Succeeding in College with Asperger Syndrome*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

NOTE: A few of these resources were written in other countries and some of the content in these resources may not be applicable for university students in Australia e.g. legislation and tertiary education system.

# REFERENCES

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