

# **ACADEMIC SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS**

## **Supporting Access, Fostering Success**





## READY 2

### WHAT TO EXPECT: HOW UNI WORKS

Just like any other institutions in modern societies, universities are subject to constant change. With all the more reason since new knowledge is being added to all academic and scientific fields at a formidable speed. Universities are not only main contributors to the generation of knowledge, they also endeavour to model it.

VU has a **Student Charter** that outlines your rights and responsibilities as a student at Victoria University. In addition, the University community has a vision and mission statement that informs its brand new Strategic Plan.

#### Vision

Victoria University will be excellent, engaged and accessible and internationally recognised for its leadership in: empowering a diverse community of students to grow their capabilities and transform their lives; engaging with industry and community to make the world a better place, through the creation, sharing and use of new knowledge.

#### Mission

Through its distinctive approach to curriculum, the student experience, research and knowledge exchange, emphasising engagement with industry and the community, Victoria University will be renowned for: empowering students from diverse countries and cultures, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, to be successful lifelong learners, grow their skills and capabilities for the changing world of work, and be confident, creative, ethical and respectful, local and global citizens; finding creative and evidence-based solutions to important contemporary challenges in Australia, Asia and globally, relating especially to education and lifelong learning, to health and active living, to the cultural diversity and well-being of communities, to economic development and environmental sustainability, and to the success of particular industries and places, including our heartland of the West of Melbourne, Australia's fastest growing region.

#### Values

The establishment of the following set of values has been informed by a survey of the staff of the University, as well as by discussion at a range of forums.

The University's values underpin our vision and mission, and are integral to guiding the implementation of this Strategic Plan. They are:

- **Access:** Victoria University is an accessible and friendly university to students and staff from diverse countries and cultures, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, as well as to our industry, government and community partners.

- **Excellence:** Victoria University is committed to excellence in education, research and knowledge exchange.
- **Respect:** The staff and students of Victoria University demonstrate respect for others from diverse countries and cultures, educational and socio-economic backgrounds, and for the natural environment.

#### Behaviours

In living out these values, the following behaviours are encouraged in the pursuit of the University's vision and mission:

- **Engagement** Victoria University is proactive in building relations with industry, government, community and other education and training providers for the mutual benefit of the partners and the university.
- **Collegiality** The Victoria University community demonstrates collegiality and teamwork with fellow students and staff.
- **Courage**, boldness, innovation and agility. Victoria University pursues its mission with courage, boldness, innovation and agility.

### 1 WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU

**Life-long learning.** Learning has been always at the base of all human endeavours. However, social and economic changes in today's modern world have turned professional and technical knowledge obsolete at the turn of ever shorter spans of time. While in times past social changes could be measured in terms of centuries and generations, currently a number of such major changes may be witnessed in just a lifetime. Life-long learning is a recognition of that fact. It also means that more important than the factual knowledge you may gain in the process of your studies is the capacity and ability to learn new things and apply that knowledge as you go.

**Attendance.** Class attendance is essential if you want to get the most of your course. While class notes and other materials might be available through Blackboard (WebCT), or in hardcopy, they are not meant to replace face-to-face contact, with its unique opportunities to ask direct questions, interact with peers and involve all your senses and learning styles in a variety of teaching and learning settings.

Apart from attending classes and following VU etiquette, your Lecturers and Tutors will assume that you will take an active interest in your own studies. This interest will be demonstrated by:

- regular reading and studying of prescribed and complementary readings
- familiarisation with the topic under discussion before each class
- completion of tasks and assessments on time
- ability to synthesise information (note-making, note-taking)
- good and fair team-work spirit
- self-advocacy: be your own advocate; others will not know if you do not speak for yourself

- self-management and self-monitoring: semesters and unit content need to be itemised to allow for regular and systematic work do the heavy lifting. This allows you to be resilient and to
- interact with peers and staff
- be resourceful
- it is OK not to be OK

## 2 YOUR UNIT GUIDE

Unit Guides give you an overview of the learning outcomes you are expected to achieve in your unit. Each Unit Guide provides you with:

- a breakdown of classes
- an outline of main subject areas (often referred as ‘content’)
- prescribed and complementary readings
- types (and dates) of related assignment tasks
- methods of assessment
- contact details and availability for consultations of your teaching staff, including your Unit and Course Coordinator.

## 3 LECTURES AND TUTORIALS

Most of your contact hours on campus will be spent attending lectures and tutorials.

**Lectures** are used to present you with general overviews of the subject matter under study on a particular week. Lectures usually build up on previous knowledge (for instance previous lectures, prescribed readings) and offer magisterial insights into the state of our knowledge with regards to a particular field: general background, contrasting theories, new perspectives and breakthroughs, all in a systematic manner. Lectures are usually delivered in lecture theatres.

You will be expected to take good **notes** of the lecture content and use this as a basis to guide your own study. While many lectures are recorded and are made accessible through Blackboard (WebCT), including accompanying lecture’s notes, these are not meant to replace them! Most lectures include question and answers time as well as audiovisuals that may not come through neatly.

**Tutorials** are sessions where academic staff (your “tutor”) explore in greater detail specific questions or areas of interest in connection with the previous lecture. Tutorials are conducted in tutorial rooms among smaller groups and may use a variety of learning situations, including group discussions, to facilitate that you engage with your studies. Tutorials are great opportunities for you to:

- pose your own questions
- discuss specific issues only “touched upon” during lecture time
- clarify doubts
- establish rapport with fellow-students and staff
- explore academic matters in connection with your essay or assignment topic

Students are expected to bring their own ideas into the tutorial group discussions.

## STUDY SKILLS

Apart from time management, there is a number of fundamental study skills that you will need to harness throughout your course. These have been summarised variously in the literature. All of them involve a degree of intensity and depth that differs considerably from what ordinarily is meant by them:

- Time management
- Critical and analytical reading
- Note-taking
- Note-making
- Essay writing
- Learning communities

### 1. TIME MANAGEMENT

Perhaps no other ability like time-management connects more directly what you are as a person with what you do as a student and a professional.

Students from one of the most prestigious universities in the world identified time management as perhaps the single most important skill acquired during their hard years of study. It is not a minor achievement. Time-management in the context of long-life learning means

- **Being strategic.** In other words, think of how your studies will fit into your present and future life prospects. Are you buying time? Is your course leading you to your professional and personal goals? Have you made use of the resources the University places at your disposal? Have you considered forming a discussion or study group with your peers to discuss your concerns, review course-related topics?
- **Cutting long term goals into achievable intermediate tasks.** This allows you to perceive seemingly insurmountable challenges into doable parts. The ability to see how a project is made up of subsets of tasks that fall within a timeline requires some effort to plan for things. The opposite tendency—seeing a task as impossible to even contemplate—leads quite naturally to deferment, procrastination, often mixed with guilt and the blaming of others.
- **A capacity to foresee when peaks and troughs are most likely to occur.** Exams and assignments tend to cluster around given periods. This in turn creates a pace of its own, which you will need to negotiate with any other job, family or lifestyle demands, including that appointment with your dentist!
- **A continuous self-monitoring to adjust** to changing personal, professional and social circumstances. This self-monitoring capability is considered an essential asset. The more realistic you are about your own capacities (when to ‘put the brakes’ and ‘when to accelerate’), the more able you’ll be to put your life in sync with the rhythm and pace of things around you.

- **Expect the unexpected and be flexible about it.** An essential attribute about your planning and time-management capacity is flexibility in the face of unplanned and unexpected events, responses, last-minute changes... Your real team-work capabilities, people and problem-solving will be tested in this way, as you go, revealing in the process important aspects of your own personality (including weaknesses that you may turn into strengths if you manage them properly). Beware of blaming others for ruining what you thought was a perfect plan! A 'perfect' plan is one that allows to self-correct as you go.

## 2. CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL READING

Reading is key to your success at University. You will need to 'process' considerable amounts of information at short notice and in cumulative ways. Most often topics will build on pre-requisite readings, moving into increasing areas of specialisation, complexity or professional applicability.

Your 'readings' will come from an assorted variety of texts ranging from textbooks to journal articles, web-pages, transcripts, technical reports, case studies, legislation, samples of previous exams, podcasts, films!

Being strategic about reading means that you do all or most of the following:

- **Scan for structure.** Most academic textbooks follow a clearly set outline and may contain summary reviews. Go back to them frequently and make sure that you do not skip headings and subheadings!
- **Identify key ideas and key words.** You must take stock of all new ideas and new words that come your way. You may wish to use a highlighter or marginal notes on your textbook to guide your own thinking. You make these annotations to give shape to your own notes (see below). Incorporating new jargon or technical words into your vocabulary is part of the necessary process of learning. Key ideas and concepts usually involve combinations and re-combinations of technical words that have precise meaning (as opposed to their more general, imprecise or non technical meaning in everyday life).
- **Move beyond ideas and words.** Science and professional work are all about theories, models, paradigms, ideal-types, protocols, applications, observations and so on. Concepts and technical words make sense only to the extent that they fit into a way of knowing and understanding a piece of reality.
- **Re-arrange information in ways that make sense to you.** You may wish to visualize your reading, or rehearse it through explanations to yourself or others, including group discussions, etc. Reading is also a sensorial experience. It works better if it is woven into the fabric of your own senses and lifestyle.
- **Be critical.** This is not an invitation to be opinionated, but rather to subject all your information to a process of critical inquiry: Is this statement in keeping with author's declared intentions? Are the conclusions supported by the evidence? Have the criticised theories or presuppositions been objectively represented? Are there unaccounted biases? Can other alternative explanations be found? Has all relevant information been sufficiently accounted for? Many of the comments

you will be making when invited to produce a critical assessment or a critical review will probably include observations related to these very questions.

- **Review frequently.** Long term memory works better if the content you have read (or summarised in your own notes) is revisited at regular intervals. Long last-minute sittings to study for exams do not produce lasting results! Short regular readings do!
- **Link new content to real-life applications.** Review of content linked to a real-life setting (a work placement for instance) will ensure that most of what you learned initially remains accessible in your memory. 'Experiential knowledge' is far more effective than surface learning.
- **Be systematic.** As your reading gets more involved, you'll notice that more and more information previously examined will be built into any new study matter.

## 3. NOTE-TAKING

Note-taking is considered an essential skill for your success at any University. Some classic textbooks were pieced together by able note-taking students! Regardless of whether notes are taken on a laptop or jotted down on a notebook, good notes should reveal some or all of the following characteristics:

- **Summarise ideas, not words.** If you are fixated on words, you will attempt to record them all (a verbatim account), instead of concentrating on the important ones
- **Reserve at least one third** of the 'page' for *your own* side notes (or marginalia)
- **Order ideas by using headings, subheadings, and outlines.** This establishes a clear hierarchy that moves from the general to the more specific. You can do this from the outset if you listen to or read with an eye for structure
- **Give further emphasis to important ideas,** direct quotes, by highlighting or underlining main concepts and keywords try to represent connections between main ideas (mind maps, diagrams, graphs).
- **Review your notes regularly** by scanning your highlighted areas
- Make notes on notes (review notes).

**REMEMBER:** Notes by others, including your lectures' notes, may need to be complemented by further annotations that make them your own

## 4. NOTE-MAKING

The notes you take from your lectures and tutorials may need to be reworked into more readable, succinct and better organised wholes. Sometimes you will make notes out of texts you read, recordings of presentations, and so on. In all these cases you are afforded the opportunity to be more strategic about how you arrange your annotations in ways that enhance your learning.

Note-making is about selecting and condensing information in ways that you can easily retrieve or commit to memory. Another function is to ensure that you take ownership of the text.

For instance, while you read a journal article, it always pays off to take notes as you read and then regroup these if only to produce your own summary, in your own words.

A well established method of note-making are “**Cornell-Notes**”. These are divided into three areas: two uneven columns stretching for about 2 thirds of the page. The right and broader column is for your notes while the left column is used to pull out main ideas. Underneath both columns is a single third column (a horizontal rectangle really) where you summarise your notes. Search the web for good examples of Cornell notes!

## 5. GROUP LEARNING - LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Another important study skill, but one often neglected, misused or misunderstood, is group learning.

Group learning may be student or lecturer-initiated and may occur spontaneously, or else be enforced through assignments that specifically call for the pulling-together of a wide range of talents and learning resources from a group of students.

Group learning is a simple way of tapping on such simple learning tools as dialogue, consultation, as well as personal and collective insights. The degree of structure that group learning may require will vary, but it is recommended that some ground rules be laid out from the outset. These may be as simple as having to agree on a schedule, a venue and the commitment to attend sessions for as long as the group decides to stick together.

If the group works towards agreed goals (e.g. a group assignment), further ground rules may need to be added and then reviewed regularly to make certain that everyone is on the same page. Self and reciprocal evaluations will help ensure that all participants chip in.

Learning communities develop the strengths of group learning by focusing on specific goals such as:

- staying together for a chat during the common lunch hour
- reviewing and discussing class topics
- meeting with a peer mentor/alumni to further explore study or career topics
- working towards a group-assignment
- lending one another moral support and encouragement
- enjoying mutual friendship and camaraderie

In recognition of the need for more meeting places Victoria University has redesigned spaces into learning hubs, such as the **Learning Commons** and the **Informal Learning Spaces**, all of which offer opportunities for you to meet with other students, work together or enjoy your wireless connection.

Given the flexible open-ended nature of study groups and learning communities, it is always worthwhile considering whether you may benefit from establishing your own group. If you are unsure about how to best

approach this, or want to give some structure to your group, you may discuss this with your Lecturer or Faculty Transition Coordinator for further ideas or assistance.

## ACADEMIC WRITING AND YOUR FIRST ASSIGNMENT

If you are new to any form of tertiary studies, you will soon realise that academic writing differs considerably from school composition and other forms of everyday writing. Some of your first assignments will comprise one or more tasks in connection with your prescribed readings and discussions at lectures and tutorials. These may vary according to your field, but typically may require you to read and search for relevant literature, assess, compare and discuss claims and counter-claims (weigh up evidence), all while ensuring that your referencing is honest (see further below on **plagiarism**) and follows the recommended **writing style**.

For instance, you may be asked to produce a book review and based on your own reflections and observations from personal related experience (perhaps a focus group you conducted, a client or a customer you dealt with professionally). This more personal experience may be used to assess the relevancy of the book's insights. Another task may require that you provide a critical assessment or comparison between two well-established different models theories, in which case you will note their relative strengths, weaknesses and even contradictions etc.

In writing your first assignments ensure that you understand exactly what sort of work is demanded of you. Underline key words, such as ‘analyse’, ‘critique’, ‘compare’ and ‘discuss’. Sketch an outline or conceptual map in response to those questions. Sign-post your transitions between paragraphs. Draft and re-draft until the text ‘flows’, and keep to the word limit. If in doubt as to how to address the key questions, do not hesitate to ask your colleagues and, if necessary, double-check with your tutor.

For a more entertaining and comprehensive audiovisual introduction to academic literacy visit: <http://tls.vu.edu.au/altc/studentresources.cfm>

**Writing guides.** Practical books on academic writing are a genre on its own right. Some books are more generic while others focus on academic literacies from a field or subject specific discipline (sociology, psychology, humanities, etc). The following four books are just an indication:

Oshima, A & Hogue, A 1999, *Writing academic English*. Longman, London  
—1997, *Introduction to academic writing*, Longman, London.

Pollman, T., 2011, *Legal Writing*, Wolters Kluwer Law & Business, New York.

Redman, P 2006, *Good essay writing: a social sciences guide*, Sage, London.

Silyn Roberts, H, 2000, *Writing for science and engineering: papers, presentations and reports* [electronic resource], Butterworth-Heinemann Oxford, Boston.

Swales, JM, Feak CB 2004, *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI.

— 2000, *English in today's research world: A writing guide*, University of Michigan Press/ESL, Ann Arbor, MI.

## 1. ESSAY WRITING

More elaborate pieces of student academic writing (typically over the 1500 word limit) take on the form of a student “essay”. The expected requirements that your essay must meet will vary depending on your field of studies (check with your lecturer/tutor). But beware, simply following the pattern of introduction-body-conclusion will not do the trick.

A student essay in the social sciences, for instance (Redman, 2006), will be expected to pose a relevant question, or series of questions, and make one or more claims that will be supported by pertinent (already existing or newly discovered) evidence. Your explanations will have to be framed in the context of one or more existing theories.

Basic recommendations that you should follow are:

- **Use your own language, or say it in your own words.** This recommendation, in reality, means “keep it simple; use short sentences; do not try to impress; be specific”.
- However, this recommendation is not an invitation to give free reign to your own opinions, or take sides (unless you are specifically invited to advocate a particular position, in which case you will provide your own “considered” and “informed” views, or take sides in the context of a ‘rigorous’ discussion, i.e. evidence-based).

It does not mean that you cannot quote directly or paraphrase other people’s thoughts and ideas. Of course you can, and indeed you are expected to do so!

- **Address the question.** A considerable number of student essays miss the point simply because they deviate from the main question (the one you say you want to address, or the one proposed to you for the essay). Go back regularly to the main question to check whether you are deviating from your original purpose! ‘Waffling’ does not work either because quantity of unrelated material is simply no evidence of ‘substance’: a car will not move by starting up the car by the side!
- **Qualify your claims and statements.** Most findings in all sciences are expressed in a language that carefully represents their relative strength (hedging). To mirror that strength it is, therefore, very important that you use phrases such as “strongly suggests”, “is likely to”, “may indicate”, “a less probable explanation is” and similar ones.
- bearing in mind points 1 and 2, make an effort to demonstrate your familiarity with the various theories, paradigms, models, protocols, ideal types, concepts and frameworks of reference that are used to explain things (and act on them!) in your discipline area.

## 2. OTHER ACADEMIC GENRES

Your Course or Unit may use in fact a variety of academic genres, such as:

- report
- lab report
- book review
- reflective journal
- notes
- executive summary
- case-studies
- biography

- literature review
- annotated bibliography
- exegesis
- portfolio
- observations
- journal article
- conference paper
- poster

Each of these follows a stable pattern (structure, length, style, etc) and serves a distinct learning, academic or professional purpose. You should expect to be introduced to some of these genres as you advance into your studies.

## 3. WRITING STYLE

Each discipline may apply a specific set of guidelines regarding how you present your assignments both in terms of layout and referencing style. Referencing styles commonly followed are APA, Harvard, Oxford, Chicago, Turabian.

Other works, also referred to as “style guides”, are in-house writing guides that cover a broader range of issues, such as punctuation, spelling, points of grammar and semantics.

Visit <http://w2.vu.edu.au/library/referencing/> and your unit outline.

## 4. REFERENCING AND PLAGIARISM

When you do your assignments, any ideas, theories, graphs, findings or contributions to your work made by others needs to be acknowledged and referenced appropriately. The absence of such acknowledgement and referencing is called plagiarism.

Acknowledgement refers to such things as the extent of help or commentary received from fellow-colleagues, co-authors, reviewers and editors. Referencing is the identification of the sources from which you have taken your data, ideas, findings, etc. Whether you quote directly (with the exact words) or indirectly (by paraphrasing), all such references to other people’s works need to be referenced.

The quality of your own work will be judged, among other things, by your capacity to ‘build on’ previous contributions made by others. At a fundamental level that means that your reporting, summaries or syntheses of other people’s works must be accurate and traceable. This allows your readers to recognise the ‘thread’ of your argument more easily, and even to check back your sources for breath of knowledge, possible inaccuracies, etc. By allowing others to ‘see through’ your arguments and weigh up the strength of your evidence, your work becomes transparent and its propositions more easily testable or contested.

As you can see, there is more to referencing than just merely avoiding plagiarism, and plagiarism involves much more than simply straightforward ‘cutting and pasting’.

In the course of your writing you will entertain doubts as to: how much ‘content’ from other authors you can bring to your own writing; when basic pieces of information can be taken for granted (without referencing them); and how your own voice can be weaved into others’ without thereby losing its own hold. The answer to these questions usually comes with time and practice. Moreover, disciplines tend to behave differently with regards to

such matters, sometimes in very subtle ways. Following a referencing style (APA, Harvard) and a writing guide is only part of the overall answer.

**Consequences.** Failure to comply with basic standards of academic integrity (of which avoidance of plagiarism is an important component) is taken as a serious breach of discipline and, depending on its extent and seriousness, it may lead to a number of consequences, including:

- repeat of assessment task
- loss of marks for assessment task
- loss of marks for unit of study
- suspension or exclusion

Some Units or Courses may actually prescribe that all or part of your written assignments be submitted through Turnitin or other plagiarism detecting software systems. This will usually be indicated by your Lecturer and included in your unit outline.

## ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Your academic progress is assessed through a series of prescribed assignments and examinations, usually outlined in your Unit Guide (make sure you have a copy in sight). Since assignments tend to follow a relatively similar pattern, it is important that you are up-to-date with your readings and that your study notes are suitable for regular review.

While some of your assessments may not be graded, all are important for the purposes of feedback. Tutors and Lecturers will be looking for depth and breadth of understanding, problem-solving skills, ability to extract and synthesise arguments, use of precise and concise language, and appropriate referencing. Most of their comments will be in connection with some of the above points and may be articulated in various standard and non-standard ways.

In the process areas that need reinforcing might be identified and addressed by attending supplementary workshops in study skills and academic writing, or through one-on-one consultations with one of our learning advisors. You do not need to wait from someone else to refer you to any of our support services —self-referrals are always welcome!

## GRADUATE CAPABILITIES

Graduate capabilities (often referred to as graduate attributes, generic and transferable skills) refer to a discrete number of overarching capabilities that are the result of successfully completing your studies. The attainment of these capabilities is being increasingly recognised as an essential component of your work-readiness. Most offers of employment will require you to demonstrate that you can meet the job description requirements by addressing specific selection criteria that, in fact, are expressions of your graduate capabilities.

While field, subject or 'content' knowledge is usually taken as a given (provided you have the right qualifications!), graduate capabilities have always a behavioural component that calls for clear instances in your academic or professional life that illustrate, show or demonstrate them. Victoria University's graduate capabilities are:

Adaptable and capable 21st century citizens, who can communicate effectively, work collaboratively, think critically and solve complex problems. Underpinning concepts here include:

- Identifying, anticipating and solving problems ranging from simple to important, complex and unpredictable problems
- Accessing, evaluating and analysing information
- Effective communication using known and yet to be developed tools in many contexts
- Using effective interpersonal skills, collaborate with, and influence, their personal, work and community networks locally and globally

Confident, creative lifelong learners who can use their understanding of themselves and others to achieve their goals in work and learning. Underpinning concepts here include:

- Understanding of the role of culture, values and dispositions in affecting achievement of goals
- Understanding how to initiate and develop new ideas
- Planning and organising self and others
- Decision making
- Responsible and ethical citizens who use their inter-cultural understanding to contribute to their local and global communities. Underpinning concepts here include:

- Respecting and valuing diversity
- Developing capacities required to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world, including courage and resilience
- Understanding the workings of local and global communities and individual's responsibilities within these
- Understanding the intricacies of balancing individual and public good

**Remember:** You will be assessed against a minimum level of graduate capabilities specified for your year of study (ie Level 3 for first year Degree units of study, level 4 for second year Degree units of study, and so on). These levels are represented in a practical matrix you may check at

## LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE (LIW)

VU is committed to provide students with authentic learning experiences integrated into courses and units. This means that part of your academic work will take place in real-life settings or involve tasks and projects where your skills and talents will be further developed and challenged. Your Unit Guide will identify which elements of your unit/course are linked to LiW experiences and their associated learning outcomes. These may not necessarily involve placements with employers or outside community organizations.

# Steps to success

## STEPS TO SUCCESS

### Prepare - Orientation Week

- Attend your course welcome session
- Attend a VU Ready session
- Check your enrolment status via MYVU Student Portal
- Check out the 'New to VU' web pages

### Activate - Week 1

- Set up your student email account
- Log in to VU Collaborate and download your unit guidelines
- Familiarise yourself with the Academic Calendar
- Log in to MYVU Student Portal

ACTIVATE



### Explore - Week 2

- Familiarise yourself with your campus
- Get to all of your classes
- Check out the academic learning support VU has to offer
- Explore the local area, shops and cafes

### Immerse - Week 3

- Immerse yourself in campus life
- Reconfirm your timetable
- Familiarise yourself with opportunities on and off campus
- Join a club and/or society

### Check In - Week 4

- Explore the library, find a Student Rover, they are there to help
- Double check your classes on your enrolment before census date
- This is your last chance to make changes to your enrolment without financial or academic penalty

