Ten Top Tips
for postgraduate study success

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1. Get your employer’s support

Assuming you are working, an employer who is supportive of your study is extremely beneficial.

Not only does it mean they may pay some or even all of the costs, they will also provide the flexibility in working hours required to attend classes. From maybe a few days off to study for exams, through to access to data to help in your studies, a compassionate employer can make a world of difference.

In most cases employers are genuinely delighted if their staff are pursuing qualifications that will ultimately help in their work. If you have such an employer, make sure you keep them updated on how you are doing and what kind of skills you have developed that can be incorporated into your job.

If you don’t have an employer, then study is a great ice-breaker at job interviews. Pursuing education shows enthusiasm and dedication and worthwhile prospective employers will view it very favourably.

If you’re returning to upgrade your qualifications, there are a number of tips and techniques to making the most of your education.
2. **Have an understanding partner, family and friends**

Study will cut into your social life. If you have a demanding job and are throwing education on top of it then your partner, friends and family are going to have to be empathetic and supportive.

If they are likely to be resentful of the time commitments required then maybe study is not for you — or perhaps it is time for a new support network! Support doesn’t equal just giving up time. It may include putting up with other students in study groups, helping source information for projects, reading drafts of assignments and sitting through endless rehearsals of presentations.

Try to involve your partner in the fun parts of your study and make sure you set aside some time with him or her where the books don’t intrude.

3. **Choose your programs and courses carefully**

The most common question I get from prospective students is for advice on helping decide between alternative programs or choosing specific courses.

I have some simple thoughts – don’t micro-specialise and try not to fall for the latest fad area that will be of little value to you in the years ahead. Students should ideally start off with a broad specialisation and narrow that towards the end of their education if it is specifically related to their employment advancement.

Choose courses that strengthen your weaknesses, rather than doing those that you think you will be naturally good at. If you are a manager and are not good at finance, then you should pick a finance course to build up your skills. That is the whole point of further study.

Finally, don’t just rely on the title of the course for what it entails. Read the syllabus, consider the lecturer in charge and talk to other students to find out about their experience. It is like choosing a book. Covers can be deceptive and some authors are worth following, no matter what the title of their book is.
4. Talk to your lecturers

We are incredibly nice human beings! In most cases — well mine at least — I am fascinated by the work of my students, their reasons for study and the things they are learning and applying.

While arguing or questioning lecturers just for the sake of it is not appropriate, a good lecturer welcomes interaction and treats students as collaborators in the learning process. Be bold, be polite and get to know your teaching staff.

5. Get a good group

Finding a focused, hard-working, enthusiastic bunch of people to work with (either in an informal study group or as a formal part of the subject’s assessment) will be very important to your success.

Many courses have a large element of group work in them and students often bemoan the problems that group work brings. Incompatible schedules, thoughts or personalities in a group can be a recipe for disaster.

My advice is to be direct when ‘shopping’ for a group. Don’t just work with the people sitting next to you. Sell yourself and seek out people that you would like to work with. Set up processes to track contributions and set some firm guidelines as to what must be done and what behaviour is acceptable.

While you will be tempted to work with friends or people from similar disciplines or cultures, some of the best groups are those with people in them from completely different thought processes. An engineer, librarian, marketer and accountant will usually make a better group than four-of-a-kind. The same goes for mixing ethnicities and learning styles. Challenge yourself to work outside your comfort zone and you will reap the rewards.
6. Visit the library

When I was first studying I used to avoid the library. All those books, all that information. I had no idea where to start, or stop.

Nowadays the library is an oasis and the library will become your best friend, whether you visit in person, or online. Librarians are customer-service focused and typically outstanding at assisting students. Most information is available electronically and is easy to find and access if you prefer the comfort of your computer screen. You can literally search the world in seconds and download all the information you need.

All universities run library orientation programs for new students. Definitely take one and prepare to be amazed. The library is also likely to have information on skills such as note-taking and exam preparation if you need a refresher.

7. Set aside study time and the right location

While it would be nice to think that you could do all your work in class time, the simple fact is that your lecturers will expect you to put in quite a bit of time outside of class.

It is a good habit to get into setting aside some quiet study time and setting up a home office or study corner to allow you to work effectively. Typing up your assignments while watching the football sounds feasible in your mind, but isn’t in reality (unless you are in my Sport Marketing class).

8. Network

Part of the value in postgraduate study is establishing a network of contacts amongst your peers and the teaching staff.

Try to meet as many people as you can through the various social activities on offer and try to establish at least a basic rapport with the staff. Even full-time students should endeavour to collect a network of potential business allies for their future career.

Most universities offer a variety of on-campus organisations you can join and this can even lead to overseas exchange programs and international competitions and awards.
9. Understand the assessment

This is where the grades are given. You will be set a series of tasks to complete that will allow your teaching staff to assess whether you have achieved the learning outcomes of the course.

First thing to do is to find out what these outcomes are, so you know exactly what it is you are expected to do. Don’t be afraid to ask for clarification and always read and re-read the requirements. You would be amazed how many students write great answers to the wrong questions!

You should also endeavour to understand the teaching style of the person marking your work. For example a lecturer that teaches by using analogies will most likely be impressed by students who incorporate analogies into their work.

Don’t be afraid to be creative but please give up any ideas of trying to impress staff with pretty pictures, extensive references just for the sake of it, obfuscation or big words (like obfuscation). We’ve seen it all before! The best projects and exam questions are usually clear, concise and creative.

10. Have fun

University life need not be a hard slog. Indeed there is no reason why each and every learning experience you have can’t be positive, rewarding and based on a sense of fun and community spirit.

Some lecturers are better than others at providing such an environment, but you should be prepared to be a contributor to the enjoyment of learning.

Teaching staff are not there as entertainers (despite my array of jokes at the ready) but are usually delighted when the students approach their work with a sense of humour and make attempts to contribute to the environment in a positive way.

RMIT University is very much a practice based university, so whether it is taste-testing beer (to prove my theory on brand image being more important than taste) or listening to an industry guest speaker defend a controversial advertising campaign, I can usually guarantee an experience that makes turning up for class worthwhile.

Being on campus amongst the hustle and bustle is half the fun. And remember no matter what you think now, your study days will give you some of the best experiences of your life.
RMIT’s 2008 Postgraduate Program Guide is now available from Info Corner, 330 Swanston Street, Melbourne. Call the helpline on 03 9925 2260 or email study@rmit.edu.au

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