

## US vs. Australian Universities

Students from the U.S. who step into an Australian university classroom will stumble and bump into a variety of differences. It's a useful exercise, a learning experience. The quicker you catch on to how things are done in Australia, however, the happier and more productive your stay will be. Here are a few of the differences you'll encounter:

- **Assessment.** U.S. students are accustomed to frequent assessment of their work. They usually have a good idea of where they stand before taking the final exam, which serves to pull a grade up or push it down. In Australia, fewer assignments are given during the semester and as much as 70% of a grade may be determined by the final exam. Papers, presentations, participation and a final exam are the norm. Forget about pop quizzes.
- **Format.** Most classes are a combination of lectures and tutorials. Information is presented to a large group in the lectures, then thrashed out in small group (approximately 15 students) tutorials. Roll is never taken, but students are responsible for the information presented in the lectures. Students are also responsible for attending, being prepared for and participating in the tutorials. Whether or not they choose to do so is their decision.
- **Schedule.** Classes usually meet once or twice a week. Students are expected to plow through at least as much material in a week as they are in the U.S., but they have to do more of it on their own. Independence, initiative and self-direction are key words. (Australian students, by the way, are usually clever enough to avoid classes on Friday.)
- **Level.** It's important for U.S. students to select courses for which they're adequately prepared. Australian students study for a three-year degree in a single academic discipline. Students in third year courses, therefore, have an extensive background in the subject. U.S. students need to select courses by level, not simply by title.
- **Texts.** Rather than one big, comprehensive text, students are presented with reading lists. Rather than regimented reading (pages 137-163 by next Wednesday), there is more directed/self-directed reading.
- **Writing.** U.S. students are accustomed to a particular style of writing, which may be wide of the mark from an Australian perspective. Bouncing a first draft off a lecturer well in advance of the deadline is a good idea. Seek criticism, then rewrite your paper so it is on target. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- **Student-lecturer relationship.** Lecturers (professors) in Australia are generally blue jeaned, first name, highly approachable types. Although the atmosphere may be casual, don't be lulled into complacency; lecturers have high expectations and make strong demands on their students. There's a distinction between style and substance, and it's the latter that ultimately counts.
- **Class participation.** U.S. students are, by and large, a welcome addition to the classroom in Australia. They have opinions, ideas and a comparative perspective and aren't afraid to chip in their two cents worth. This enlivens the entire classroom, and Australian lecturers appreciate it. (Australian students are more reluctant to speak up unless they know they know the answer.)

- Studying. Australian students are "closet studiers." They pretend they're not studying, but are quietly putting in their time. Unfortunately, many U.S. students are suckered by the Aussie's "no worries" facade. They're lured into a false sense of security by the nonchalance of the Australian students. Strike an appropriate balance between your studies and other pursuits and budget your time accordingly.

- Grades. There's no grade inflation in Australia. Students are graded according to the normal distribution curve. It's extremely hard to get "high distinction" or "distinction." The majority of Australian students simply receive a passing grade (and a few don't). In Australia a passing grade is perfectly OK. Students are, perhaps, more interested in mastering the material and less stressed out about earning a high grade point average.

U.S. students eventually catch on and generally do quite well in the Australian system. They needn't be overly concerned about the differences, but they do need to be aware of them--particularly during the first few weeks when it appears as if there's nothing to do. With classes meeting infrequently, papers not due for weeks, reading that can wait, more distractions than you can shake a stick at and Australian students egging you on, U.S. students often slip behind academically. Since staying on pace is easier than catching up, students are advised to pack a semester's worth of self-discipline. Work hard & you'll do well. No worries.

Best wishes for a wonderful semester Down Under!

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