

UNIVERSITY
of
OTAGO

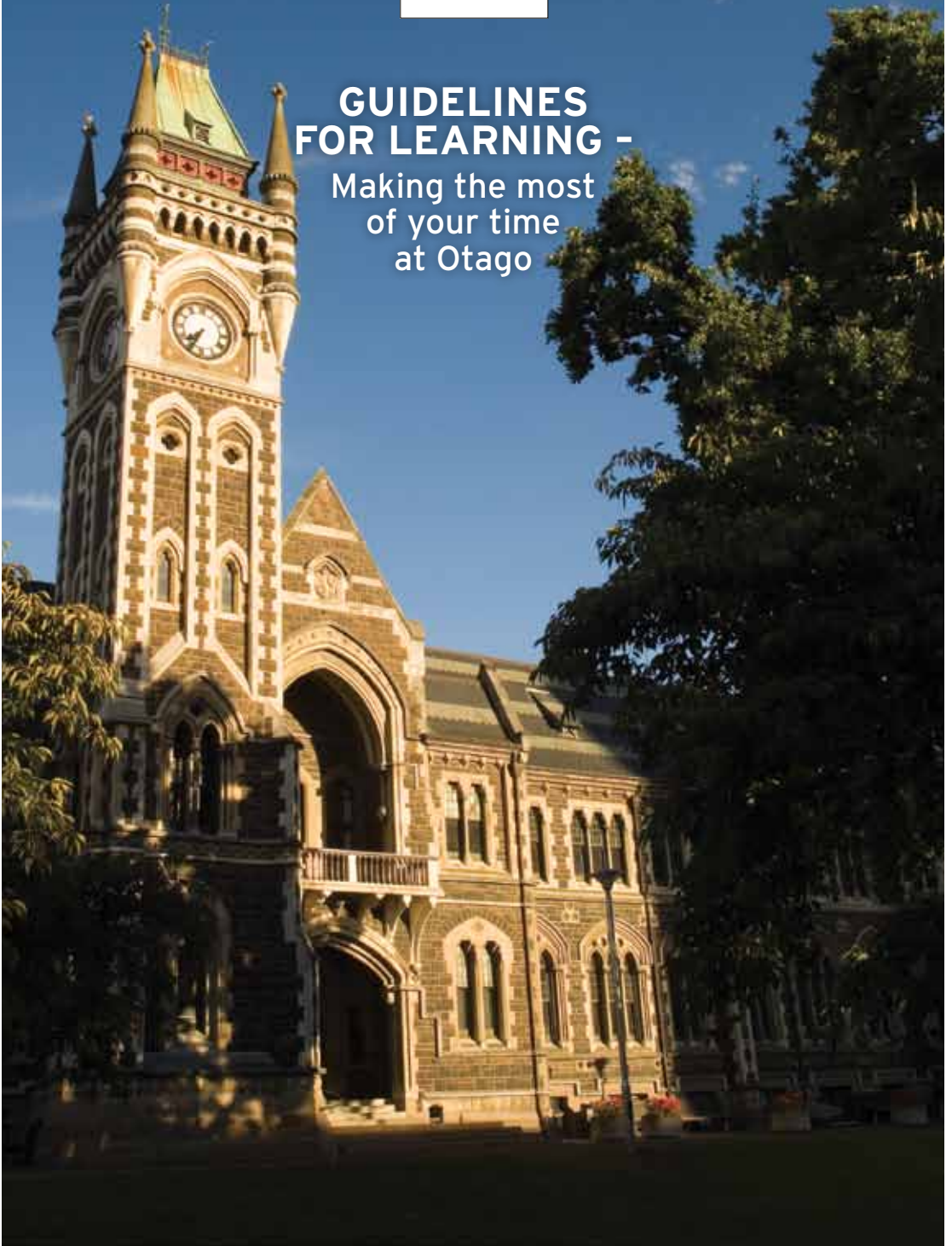


Te Whare Wānanga o Otago

NEW ZEALAND

GUIDELINES FOR LEARNING -

Making the most
of your time
at Otago



Guidelines for Learning - Making the most of your time at Otago

The transition to university is a significant step in your life. You may have left the structure of a school environment and have probably moved away from your home town to pursue your chosen field of study. These guidelines will help you get the most, academically, from your time at Otago.

In this brief guide you will find answers to questions such as:

- How do I settle in to university?
- What are my responsibilities as a learner at Otago?
- How do effective university learners approach their study?
- How can I succeed in my courses?
- Where can I go for advice and support?
- What does being in a research-intensive university mean for me as a learner?
- Why am I asked to give feedback on the quality of teaching and courses?
- What is my study building towards?
- What if I have made the wrong choice of programme and/or courses?

How do I settle in to university?

It may seem as though everyone else knows what they are doing, but they have all been new to the University at some point and they have all had to learn the "university ways".

University is different from other educational institutions you may have attended. Feeling overwhelmed is normal and, if you accept this, it will help you through the transition. A key difference between university and school is that you will need to become self-motivated as no one is going to wake you up and ensure your "homework" is done!

For many students, the whole of the first semester is a transition. There are so many "firsts": your first lecture, your first assignment, your first end of semester exams, and your first final marks. For many students, it does not stop there and the second semester brings more "firsts": possibly dealing with disappointing marks, friendships that have not lasted, or not achieving entry requirements for your chosen course. However, there will also be significant achievements, such as finishing your first year and learning new study skills.

What are my responsibilities as a learner at Otago?

At university you have to make the most of the opportunities that come your way. That is, you should be active in your learning!

¹ available at www.otago.ac.nz/about, under "Official Documents"

The Student Charter¹ outlines your rights and responsibilities. You will see that, as a student at Otago, you have a responsibility to be committed and engaged in your learning and to **allow sufficient time for study**. You are also expected to:

- be self-motivated
- be self-directed (this means you are responsible for your learning and for planning your time)
- participate actively in your courses of study
- prepare for classes which require work in advance
- listen and participate in classes
- respect the viewpoints of others
- form study groups
- put the best effort possible into assignments and submit work which is your own
- hand work in on time!
- seek to develop critical thinking skills and apply these to your courses of study
- provide constructive feedback to University staff
- promote an environment which is safe and free from harassment and discrimination
- seek help early on from staff when necessary
- observe office hours – this is when staff are available to talk to you
- use appropriately the services and resources of the University
- be part of the University community and participate in life beyond the classroom
- take a breather once in a while
- look ahead to the *Otago Graduate Profile* (see p5) and consciously strive to achieve it.

How do effective university learners approach their study?

Effective learners take an approach to study in which they seek to extract meaning and to gain understanding. In this way they strive to work out how they can apply what they learn in a variety of situations.

Reading, listening, writing, making judgements, comparing and contrasting ideas, questioning propositions, and challenging ideas are all skills highly effective learners use, develop and refine while they are learning. They reinterpret and build their knowledge. They listen to each other; to their tutors and to their lecturers and they think, question, discuss, resolve dilemmas, and reflect. They aim to better understand the wider meaning of their learning. Sometimes that wider meaning can result in real changes in the way they view the world – a transformation! Learning is exciting and the journey of learning at university is an exciting journey to take!

So take note of the way your teachers work with you. Look for structures in the learning activities and assignments. Think about ideas and how they connect and interconnect. Take up opportunities to discuss ideas with other students and with your teachers. Ask questions! Be prepared to think deeply about ideas and how those ideas can be applied in different ways in different situations.

No matter the learning strategy you use – memorisation, discussion, composition, performance, argument, analysis, experimentation, observation, reading, writing, listening – and no matter the activity you are presented with – assignments, project work, critiques, group work, experiments, design projects – seek to make links in your understanding. Successful learners at university do all these things.

How can I succeed in my courses?

First, find out what is expected of you. A good place to start is the course outline, which describes the course's learning outcomes, how it will be taught and assessed, and how many hours you should allow for study – both within the classroom and in your own time.

Lectures

Lectures are a core method of teaching at Otago. Some students expect to be provided with full lecture notes, but most lecturers believe that you are more active in your learning if you take your own notes. Lectures also provide structure to the topic and signal areas of further study, so it is important to attend them.

If lectures are posted in advance (such as on Blackboard – the online learning system, or in a course hand-out) then try to read through the notes before the lecture. This gives you a better understanding of what the lecturer will be talking about, and you may also generate some questions to ask in the lecture (or to the lecturer afterwards).

Expect to be studying between lectures. Ideally you should go over your notes soon after the lecture and again a day later, undertaking further reading (as provided in course outlines, hand-outs or through Blackboard). Expect to continue revising your notes at regular intervals.

While some lecturers talk for most of the lecture, others seek interactivity – encouraging you to think about ideas and discuss these with your neighbours.

Lecturers usually welcome questions, so do not be afraid to raise your hand, approach them afterwards, or drop past their office – but do check their office hours for availability.

Additional learning opportunities

Tutorials, where smaller groups of students develop specific academic skills under the guidance of a postgraduate student tutor or a lecturer, provide an additional class environment to further your learning. They usually require some preparation to make the most of the opportunity. In addition to course or programme-organised tutorials, many of the Colleges of Residence also provide tutorial support.

Some disciplines have practical sessions (e.g. labs, clinics, field-based, design studios etc.) and these are crucial for your learning. For health and safety or professional reasons, there is often a “dress code” for these practical sessions, so find out what is required and dress accordingly.

As for lectures, it is important to attend tutorial and practical sessions – they provide very rich learning opportunities!

Assessment

At university you can expect to encounter a mixture of internal assessment and a final exam for most courses. Typically a range of internal assessment types are used and these vary according to the discipline area and level of study. For example, in the sciences you may be assessed using laboratory reports, tests with multiple choice questions (MCQs) and short-answer questions, projects and assignments. In the humanities you may be assessed via essays, project work, learning journals and reflective critiques. Sometimes you may undertake group-work, which is an important way to develop communication, time management and teamwork skills.

The key to doing well in any assessment is to prepare well, allow plenty of time for studying, practice, and seek and pay attention to feedback from peers, tutors or lecturers.

Where can I go for advice and support?

If you are in doubt about what or how to read, or are struggling with understanding, ask your tutor or lecturer for assistance. If you want to refresh or build new academic skills, such as note-taking or academic writing, attend a workshop in the Student Learning Centre (in the ISB for Dunedin students) or seek support from learning advisors (on the other campuses).

Other sources of support are listed at www.otago.ac.nz/services. These include:

- ITS (e.g. using Blackboard) (<https://blogs.otago.ac.nz/sits/>);
- Library (orientation to library resources, searching databases etc.) (www.library.otago.ac.nz/index.php);
- Student Learning Development support (<http://hedc.otago.ac.nz/hedc/sld.html>);
- Māori Student support services (www.otago.ac.nz/maoricentre/);
- Pacific Island support services (www.otago.ac.nz/pacific/);
- International student support (www.otago.ac.nz/international/studentsupport.html);
- Disability Information and Support (www.otago.ac.nz/disabilities/);
- Departmental Advisors; and
- Liaison Officers (www.otago.ac.nz/services/liaison_office.html).

A relatively new initiative on the Dunedin campus is the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), where senior undergraduates mentor first-year students. If PASS is operating in your programme, consider signing up. Later in your academic journey, you may want to “give back” and become a peer mentor yourself.

What does being in a research-intensive university mean for me as a learner?

A distinct feature of Otago is its research culture. Following the 2006 audit of research performance in New Zealand universities, Otago was the top-ranked university for research quality in the country. But what does this mean for you? It means that most of your lecturers are research active and possibly leaders in their field – nationally or even internationally.

Because most lecturers are active in research, this typically enhances the learning experience for you – be it in lectures, laboratories or tutorials. Lecturers are enthusiastic about teaching in their research area and this shines through in their teaching, often stimulating your interest in the topic. However, as well as teaching, your lecturers dedicate considerable time to research. There will, therefore, be some days when they are unavailable. They may be working in a lab, off campus, or writing up papers and books for publication. Through your lecturers' teaching, you will probably learn of their research interests, but you can also ask them. Departmental research seminars are a good chance to learn more about research being undertaken in your department and these are open to all.

Why take these opportunities? As you progress through your study, you should be developing inquiry and research skills. You may become involved in research later in your degree – through group project work, independent projects or summer research studentships. Seize these opportunities, as the range of skills you will develop are highly valued by employers.

Why am I asked to give feedback on the quality of teaching and courses?

As you progress through your study, you will be asked to provide feedback on the quality of teaching and courses.

There are two main surveys: the individual teacher survey and the course evaluation survey. It is crucial that you complete these with care, as they are used to improve teaching and learning experiences for future students. They also provide evidence of the teaching ability of lecturers, as they progress in their career.

Two less-frequent surveys are: the student opinion survey and the graduate opinion survey (issued soon after you graduate). Feedback from these is also supplied to the department or programme so they can make improvements.

What is my study building towards?

What will you have at the end of your Otago undergraduate education? This is best answered through the *Otago Graduate Profile* – a description of the attributes demonstrated by a typical Otago graduate.

Lecturers can provide opportunities to help foster and develop these attributes. Some opportunities will arise through curriculum experiences, while others may come from engagement beyond the classroom. It is a shared responsibility between lecturers and students to help track your progress towards acquisition of these attributes.

As an Otago graduate, you will possess a deep, coherent and extensive knowledge of at least one discipline, and have knowledge of the fundamental contribution of research to that discipline.

Otago graduates often have an immense pride and fierce loyalty to the institution, and experience a huge amount of personal growth during their time at university.

In varying degrees, you will also possess the following sets of attributes:

- **GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE:** Appreciation of global perspectives in the chosen discipline(s) and the nature of global citizenship
- **INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE:** Commitment to intellectual openness and curiosity, and the awareness of the limits of current knowledge and of the links amongst disciplines
- **LIFELONG LEARNING:** Commitment to the on-going acquisition of new knowledge and new skills, and an ability to apply these to an ever-changing environment
- **SCHOLARSHIP:** Commitment to the fundamental importance of the acquisition and development of knowledge and understanding

These attributes include those most often sought by employers:

COMMUNICATION: Ability to communicate information, arguments and analyses effectively, both orally and in writing

CRITICAL THINKING: Ability to analyse issues logically, to challenge conventional assumptions, to consider different options and viewpoints, make informed decisions and act with flexibility, adaptability and creativity

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: Knowledge and appreciation of biculturalism within the framework of the Treaty of Waitangi; knowledge and appreciation of multiculturalism; and an ability to apply such knowledge in a culturally appropriate manner.

ETHICS: Knowledge of ethics and ethical standards and an ability to apply these with a sense of responsibility within the workplace and community

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY: Basic understanding of the principles that govern natural systems, the effects of human activity on these systems, and the cultures and economies that interact with those systems

INFORMATION LITERACY: Ability to apply specific skills in acquiring, organising, analysing, evaluating and presenting information, in particular recognising the increasing prominence of digital-based activity

RESEARCH: Ability to conduct research by recognising when information is needed, and locating, retrieving, evaluating and using it effectively

SELF-MOTIVATION: Capacity for self-directed activity and the ability to work independently

TEAMWORK: Ability to work effectively as both a team leader and a team member

In addition to these generic attributes, your discipline may also list attributes it desires in a graduate. You can find these out from your department or programme coordinator.

As you progress through your academic journey, keep a hard copy or digital file documenting evidence of achieving these attributes. Future employers may be interested to see an example of your writing, an oral presentation, or evidence of your ability to work in a team.

Towards the end of your degree, start compiling your *Curriculum Vitae*. Ensure you write about the range of attributes you have acquired during your time at Otago. Be aware that the Career Development Centre is available to help you prepare your *Curriculum Vitae* and to provide tips about effective interviewing for jobs.

What if I have made the wrong choice of programme and/or courses?

Sometimes students embark on a course of study before realising it does not interest them, or that they are having difficulty succeeding in. It is never too late to change course.

The Liaison Officers and advisors in your department or in the Career Development Centre have a sound knowledge of options across the University and can guide your decision-making.

It is important to study something you enjoy – rather than enrolling in a programme that may have good vocational choices, but offers little interest for you. If you are interested in your studies, you will be much more motivated to study and achieve.

Following these guidelines will make a significant difference to how effective your learning is during your time at Otago. If you need assistance, take advantage of the support structures available – they are there to help you succeed!



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