Switched On

student-to-student survival secrets

student study tips
‘Study... been there, done that, survived and thrived... and so can you.’

Section one

The tips and advice in this booklet are straight from CDU graduates and final year students. It’s designed for all CDU students, especially those of you who are starting to study later in life or starting again after a long break.

All the contributors emphasised the importance of being switched on to those activities that lead to success in student life: how to study effectively without it consuming your life, what to do to make the most of tutorials and lectures, where to find the good websites, how to recognise the bad ones, and why time management is vital.

Starting university is a life-changing event. You’re no longer constrained by high school rules, yet you’re still a student – and you could be aged anywhere from 18 to 98! You may be working full-time, a stay-at-home parent, or a retiree with a thirst for knowledge. These tips are designed to help minimise upheaval in your life when you take up university study.

At Charles Darwin University we understand that many of our students face the challenge of balancing study commitments with the demands of work, home and family life.

We recognise that a “typical student” doesn’t exist anymore. So, whatever your age or situation, CDU’s flexible approach to learning means you no longer have to attend full-time, on-campus lectures to get your degree. At CDU you can pretty much undertake study from anywhere in the world, at anytime you choose.

With this in mind, we have compiled this guide with the help of experts – our student contributors who have studied in various modes to complete their degrees. Many are “mature age” students (meaning they weren’t fresh out of high school) which also gives them a very different perspective on studying.

Based on their time at CDU, they have provided invaluable practical, personal and academic survival strategies to help you undertake your own studies successfully and confidently.

Did you know?

“Mature age” means any student who is over 19 years old and has been out of full-time education for more than a year.
Start me up

All the students we talked to emphasised the importance of getting off to a good start, and being well-prepared and organised.

Overload alert

Be objective about your home/work/study balance. Consider how many responsibilities you have in a week and how your studies will fit with everything else you need to do. Realistically, how many hours a week can you commit to study? Many students start off enthusiastically and take on more units than they can handle comfortably in one semester.

Avoid taking on too much when you start out as this can lead to high stress and poor results. If you have heavy work and family commitments, consider a lighter load to start with until you settle into your new routine. For help with time management and planning your study visit W: www.learnline.cdu.edu.au/studyskills.

Upgrade your computer skills

Knowing how to word process, send emails and surf the net is just the beginning. Learn all you can about your computer. It’s your primary link to the university and an essential study tool. Know how to download files, create zip files, create folders, archive documents and create shortcuts.

IT set-up for success

Different courses have varying software program requirements. Ensure your system has the capacity to download the relevant programs. Discuss software needs with your lecturer before starting a unit. CDU’s Information Technology Management and Support team has guidelines for computer set-up requirements in the IT support section at W: www.cdu.edu.au/studentnet/support.

“The computer ate my homework.”

This excuse just doesn’t cut it in this age of super-sophisticated IT. It’s vital that you have a reliable internet connection and that you back up your files regularly.

Did you know?

A full-time study load is four units a semester. Most units carry 10 credit points. A full-time study load represents 40 credit points a semester, but if you’re studying part-time CDU’s academic support staff recommend that you take no more than two units a semester. A full-time study load for Centrelink purposes is 30 credit points a semester. You’ll find that each course outline on the web has a recommended study plan.

Insider tip: Simple but useful – save the layouts to items such as your generic assignment cover sheet, contents pages and reference pages to your personal files. That way you can reuse them and change details as needed without having to start from scratch every time you submit an assignment.
Get organised

You'll keep up with your study program more easily if you organise your time effectively. Successful students are disciplined with time, set clear study goals and use their available free time.

‘No’ means ‘no’
Your time is valuable. Just because you’re a student does not mean you’re free to take on extra commitments. Learning to say “no” to friends and relatives in favour of study is one of the most difficult changes to come to terms with.

Timetable tactics
Draw up a timetable or buy an office-style wall-planner and identify university, work and personal commitments. It also helps to block out times for study and assignments weeks in advance so you won’t over-commit. Then, if you do end up with some spare time, it’s a bonus. Try programming dates for assignments and exams into a computer calendar with an electronic reminder.

Night owls and early birds
Students with families often find it easier to read for long periods at night or early in the morning when home is quiet, and do follow-up writing activities during the day in short bursts between family demands.

Quiet zones
Choose a quiet space for study. Local universities and council libraries are ideal locations, free from the distractions of home.

Don’t panic
If you realise you’ve taken on too much and you need to withdraw from a unit, it’s not the end of the world or your degree. You can re-enrol in that unit at a later date.

Did you know?
Some interstate uni libraries have reciprocal borrowing rights with CDU. Ask CDU’s library staff for information.
Please explore ... our website

Have a good look at the CDU website. It’s user-friendly and contains important and helpful information about our services, staff contacts and courses.

Visit W: www.cdu.edu.au/studentnet to find answers to most of your “getting started” questions, including an interactive study skills program. Another useful site for students is at W: www.cdu.edu.au/studentnet/adminforms.

If you’re studying off-campus, visit the External Student Support site at W: www.cdu.edu.au/library/access/index. Support staff can assist students who are studying externally/off-campus and they offer a variety of services including assignment tracking and arrangements for taking external exams.

Did you know?
CDU provides you with an individual student email account and uses this account to communicate with you about your course and your enrolment. You need to check it regularly to ensure you have the latest information about study.

Talk before you leap
(or withdraw from a unit!)

Always discuss your study options with your lecturer. Keep in mind that if you withdraw before census date, you will not be charged fees for the unit. The census date refers to the last date you can withdraw from a unit without suffering any academic or financial penalty. You’ll find census date information at W: www.cdu.edu.au/studentnet/calendar.
‘Asking for help from your lecturers or support staff is one of the simplest and smartest things you can do.’

Did you know?

Almost all CDU students are required to undertake a unit called Academic Literacies, but exemptions may be considered for students who have undertaken previous relevant study. Academic support staff advise that if you’re not confident about your writing or haven’t written “uni-style” for a while, it’s a good idea to take it in your first semester.

Learn more on Learnline

Learnline is the name of CDU’s online learning environment. Every CDU student needs to know how to use it, but Learnline is particularly important for external students. It is also a good social networking tool for meeting and chatting with other students and lecturers. Visit W: www.cdu.edu.au/gettingstarted/learnline.

Take a few Learnline practice activities through the online tutorials to develop your confidence. Visit W: http://online.cdu.edu.au.

The discussion boards on Learnline quickly connect students with each other, providing the opportunity to exchange information and assistance on study topics.

Insider tip: Always ask questions no matter how silly or unimportant you think they are. Chances are there’ll be plenty of others wondering the same thing too.
Love your library

The CDU library may prove to be one of your most useful study buddies. Get to know what resources are available. The library has specialist staff who help students find what they’re looking for. Knowing how to find good primary and secondary online information sources is essential. The library website is a great starting point. Try the virtual library tour to become familiar with what’s on offer in this great resource. Update your research and essay writing skills through online tutorials at W: www.cdu.edu.au/library/infolit/tutorials.

Ace your assignments

Assignments can be daunting, particularly if you haven’t studied for a while. The hardest step is the first one, i.e., making a start and getting something down on paper.

Try carving your assignment into bite-size pieces. If you tackle smaller, more manageable sections by giving each one a mini-deadline ahead of the due date, as you finish a section you will feel you have accomplished something. You’ll also save lots of time working out referencing in your assignments by visiting W: www.cdu.edu.au/library/LILL/referencing.

Give yourself a break. Leave the first draft of an assignment alone for at least 24 hours and then come back to it and read it with “fresh eyes.”
Websites... the good, the bad and the downright dodgy

A typical search for information on the web will throw up links to thousands, if not millions, of sites. Sifting through them can be confusing and time-consuming. Not all websites and sources are credible, so read with a critical, objective eye. CDU’s library staff can help you to determine what’s worth reading, but below are some useful tips:

- Find the author’s name and qualifications. If they’re a university lecturer or subject expert, keep reading. If they’re a journalist, no matter how good the writing, their opinion may be biased. If they are an anonymous source writing under a pseudonym, they may also be biased or the information questionable.

- Avoid Wikipedia. It’s a well known name, but it’s not regulated so it’s not necessarily a reliable source of information. Anyone can contribute to it or edit its content.

- Consider the site’s publication date. Information posted more than a few years ago may be out of date.

- Always read the websites recommended by your lecturer on Learnline. They’ve done the leg-work for you through years of their own study and research, so you can be sure the information on these sites is credible and will also be relevant to your assignment topic.
"My best advice? Don’t give up! You will make it through your degree. As your confidence and knowledge grow, you might even find you enjoy it along the way."

Some final words of wisdom...

**DO** ask questions if you’re unsure. Seek clarification from your lecturer if you don’t understand something. And...

**DON’T** leave all your questions and concerns until the night before your assignment is due.

**DO** keep in touch with your lecturers. Find out the best way to contact them and the best times to do so. At the start of semester, ask individual lecturers about their preferences. Some prefer email only while others are happy to talk over the phone. If either way is acceptable, send a brief email asking for a convenient time to call, particularly if you wish to discuss a personal or complex study matter.

**DO** make the effort to connect with other students. Study groups are particularly helpful in keeping motivation high and helping you to remain on top of the unit.

**DO** verify all information sources from the internet. The amount of information available on any topic via the internet is overwhelming. It’s often hard to know what’s fact and what’s not. Authenticate all information for your assignments by checking all sources and dates, etc.

**DON’T** get too distracted by discussion board debates. Certain issues can generate heated, opinionated discussion and can become personal and upsetting for some students.

**DON’T** rely on others’ lecture notes. While it’s useful to borrow another student’s notes to supplement your own, it is a case of “buyer beware”. They are not your notes, so you don’t know how accurate they are and they may end up being more confusing than helpful.

**DON’T** get too involved in online student gossip. As with any “workplace” there will always be gossip about teaching staff and the uni itself. Don’t place too much stock in online chatter about the philosophical preferences and the likes and dislikes of particular lecturers.

**DON’T** rely on spell check. Ask a friend to proofread the assignment for spelling and grammar.

**DO** contact Student Services if you have any questions about your enrolment or fees, E: enrolmenthelp@cdu.edu.au.

**DO** call the Information Centre helpline 1800 061 963 during office hours.