

CQU Survival Kit

REAL ADVICE FROM ALUMNI WHO'VE BEEN THERE

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Introduction

Starting university can feel overwhelming, but you don't have to figure it out alone.

As part of the *30 Minutes a Month* program, CQUniversity alumni shared the advice they wish they had known in their first year. This toolkit brings together their insights to help you feel more confident, supported and prepared for what's ahead.

1. You don't need to have it all figured out

Most students feel uncertain at the start. That's normal, and it's part of learning.

"I didn't have to have everything figured out in first year. When I started, it felt like everyone else had a plan and I didn't. The truth was most people were just as unsure, just better at hiding it."

— Erin Hopgood

"The transition to university takes time, and uncertainty is part of the process. Seeking support early, whether from peers, lecturers or student services, makes a meaningful difference. Every conversation and every question helps you build your place here. Trust the process and be patient with yourself."

— Ramesh Anthony

"You don't have to have everything figured out. Take your time, explore, and get comfortable learning at your own pace. Some days will feel easy, others won't, and that is completely normal. Just keep showing up."

— Niruta Pathak

"Feelings of self-doubt don't mean you're not capable. They often mean you are paying attention and learning. The discomfort is part of the process, not a warning sign."

— Shantelle Poynter

"My first year felt daunting and I experienced imposter syndrome. Talking to other students made me realise they felt the same. I also found simple things like ambient music helped me stay focused."

— Susan Scarr

"Take a slow breath. You are not supposed to have all the answers yet. That is why you are a student. Your job is to learn, not to already know."

— Dr Katrina Lane-Krebs

"You don't need to have everything figured out in your first year. Focus on building a routine, learning how you learn best and asking for help early. The rest will come."

— Tanya O'Shea

2. Get organised early (future you will thank you)

A simple plan early on makes everything feel more manageable later.

"Plan your time early. Print a calendar, mark assessment dates and classes and map out your week alongside your other commitments. Make it visible in your study space and stick to it."

— Janet Hunt

"Diarise all your assessment dates and work backwards. Allocate time for each task so it becomes more manageable. When you have a spare moment, you already know what to work on next."

— Dr Sharon Dekkers

[Watch this video](#) that illustrates how this works in practice.

"I marked all my assessments in my diary and blocked out time in advance. It helped me avoid double booking myself and reduced stress around deadlines."

— Shelly Coombs & Adam Bean

"Make a plan for your assessment tasks early so you know when everything is due. If you are unsure about anything, reach out to your lecturers."

— Xirui Wang

"Find a time-management system early and stick to it. I used Excel to track my workload, including planners and simple progress tracking. It helped me stay organised, reduce stress and keep my study realistic. These are skills I still use every day in my career."

— Sammy Hayhoe

"Map out each unit in the first week. Add deadlines, readings and tasks into your calendar. Give yourself time to review and refine your work rather than leaving it to the last minute."

— Estella Tsui

"Breaking work into smaller milestones helped me feel less overwhelmed and gave me a sense of progress."

— Mikayla Lythgo

[Watch this video](#) that illustrates how you can do this.

"Check your course handbook early. You can often see past assessments and topics which gives you a clear idea of what to expect and helps you feel more prepared."

— Peta-Maree Parsole

"Create a dedicated study space. It doesn't need to be fancy, but it should be consistent. Having a set space helps your brain recognise when it's time to focus."

— Dr Katrina Lane-Krebs

3. Ask for help — you're not expected to know everything

Support is there for a reason. The sooner you use it, the easier things become.

"You're not expected to know everything. There is no such thing as a stupid question. The academics at CQU are there to support you, so don't hold back from asking."

— Kathy Miller

"It's okay to reach out for help. You are not a burden. Perfection is not everything. Do your best, learn from feedback and show yourself some self-compassion."

— Breanna Morgan

"Even as an online student, there is a lot of support available. Teaching staff are responsive and helpful. Don't be afraid to reach out."

— Veronica Yeo

"Ask questions and connect with your lecturers and peers. Learning is easier when you don't do it alone. Trying to figure everything out on your own is exhausting and you will miss out on great connections."

— Jennie Hotz & Vicki Lyons

"Reaching out to others, whether lecturers or peers, builds confidence and helps deepen your understanding."

— Cianna Mariposa

4. Use the support available

There are more resources available than you think. Knowing where to go makes a big difference.

"The Academic Learning Centre has resources to support all areas of study, especially assessments. Check it out early to understand what is expected and build your skills."

— Jason Mackenzie

"The Academic Learning Centre offers support across writing, referencing and assessments. I wish I had used it sooner."

— Robbie Fletcher & Zara Costello

Find out more about the [Academic Learning Centre](#).

"CQU supports the whole student. I always felt heard and supported. Don't be afraid to share your needs and access what is available."

— Kathryn A

"Spend time with your supervisors. One meeting can save you weeks of confusion. Set expectations early and communicate regularly. PhDs are long. Confusion is optional. A little clarity upfront goes a very long way."

— Dr Johanna Rhodes

"If you have additional challenges, speak with support services early. Putting support in place gives you options and reduces pressure later."

— Dr Katrina Lane-Krebs

Find out more about our [Accessibility and Equity services](#).

5. Build study habits that actually work

Small, consistent habits will carry you further than last-minute effort.

"Review your notes within 48 hours. Rewrite them, test yourself and identify key ideas. This reduces stress before exams."

— Dr Tracy Trethewy

"Create a simple study ritual. Doing the same small actions each time helps you get into the right mindset to focus."

— Steven Menczel

"Sometimes starting for just 10 minutes is enough. Motivation comes after you begin."

— Poonam Roy

"Check Moodle regularly and stay on top of updates. Small habits like this keep you organised."

— Evangeline Bridges

"Colour coding subjects and deadlines helped me stay organised and manage multiple units."

— Kellie Wellard

"Plan your week ahead. Break big goals into smaller tasks and assign them to specific days. It makes everything feel more achievable."

— Maisa Pereira

6. Study smarter, not harder

The right tools and techniques can save you time and reduce stress.

"Use tools that work for you. I used NotebookLM to turn lecture content into audio summaries. It made studying more efficient."

— Jarrid Kennedy

"Apps that block distractions can help you stay focused during study sessions."

— Chloe Wieden

"Downloading lecture audio allowed me to study while commuting or walking. Small adjustments like this make a big difference. The PASS study sessions are also a great way to reinforce learning."

— Samantha Houghton

[Find out more about the Peer Assisted Study Sessions \(PASS\).](#)

"I found working on paper and organising files clearly helped me retain information and stay on top of assessments."

— Bronwyn Turner

7. Build discipline and structure

Creating structure helps you stay on track, even when motivation drops.

"Set structured study times and reduce distractions. Even a couple of focused hours each day can keep you on track, using methods like Pomodoro, time blocking or a simple to-do list."

— Fletcher Kendal

"A detailed timetable helped me stay disciplined and accountable, especially while balancing FIFO work and study."

— Matthew Monkivitch

"I would highly recommend the book *Deep Work* by Cal Newport. It really helped me think about and change the way I studied. Deep, focused work helped me study more effectively and free up time for other areas of life."

— Anna Battersby

"Check which units might be available in term 3 to reduce your workload and making the workload more manageable while still accessing key support."

— Melissa Purkis

"Don't rely on instant memory or cramming before exams. Learn memory tools, these will serve you well and make learning easier. Every beginning student can benefit by having a deep understanding about how the brain learns and remembers best. These tools have certainly made my work and study much easier."

— Dr Judi Newman

Want to learn more about the cognitive process of learning? Check out the [How the Brain Learns, Retains and Masters Information](#) micro-credential.

Check out [Dr Judi Newman's books, posters and classroom resources](#) on social cognitive neuroscience.

8. Think differently about learning

University is not just about managing your time. It is about changing how you think and learn.

“Unlike high school that focused on regurgitating facts and figures, tertiary studies require you to understand and apply the concepts taught to different scenarios... Focus on understanding and applying the concepts taught in each unit of study, and you'll avoid taking the 15-year 'scenic route' towards your career.”

— Jasmine Lee

“Connecting theory to real-world situations makes learning more meaningful and easier to apply.”

— Alejandro Martinez

“I wish I had known that the overwhelming feeling of being a first-year student could have been eased if I had applied the planning and scheduling techniques I was already experienced with to my studies. It's okay to feel uncertain when you're just starting out — it's when learning begins.”

— Drew Ranken

“Ideal situations are rare. Be prepared to adapt and continue learning. Classrooms are very different to the scenarios you map out, and having a range of resources and plans gives you a strong mindset going forward.”

— Veronica Hartwig

“I focused on highly regarded research and built strong relationships with my supervisors to support both learning and practical application.”

— Saumindra Bhattacharya

9. Make study work for your life

Your study needs to fit your life, not compete with it.

“Source quality second-hand textbooks, know your assessment topics and dates. After you enter Moodle read your introduction then go to assessments. Write down or enter into your digital calendar, the assessment name, course code and due dates and set multiple reminders. Remember, uni is not a sprint but a planned marathon that can take you places you never dreamed of.”

— Sheryl Cavanagh

“Make sure you take the time to plan non-study activities, such as joining groups, organising catch ups with friends. Time away from study is important to rest your brain properly and de-stress.”

— Bronwyn Turner

“As an overseas student and new arrival in Australia the hack thar helped me most was connecting with other students who were new to Australia. This community shared similar experiences, which helped settle my nerves in term 1.”

— Syed Karim

“One thing that really helped me stay organised was using an A2 yearly planner. I wrote down all my assessments and important events in one place, which made it easier to see what was coming up. It also helped me plan my time and reduce stress around deadlines. Even if you don't do exactly this, find a system that works for you so nothing gets missed.

— Blake White

Final reminder

You're not expected to know everything.
You're not the only one figuring it out.
And you don't have to do it alone.

If you need any extra support, be sure to visit the [MyCQU portal](#).

Get involved

These insights were shared by CQUniversity alumni as part of the *30 Minutes a Month* program, a simple way to give back and support current students.

Find out more:

<https://www.cqu.edu.au/engage/alumni/30-minutes-a-month>