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1 Getting Started as a Postgraduate

1 Introduction

Perhaps you are reading this book because you plan to study overseas. Perhaps you have just been accepted into a university as a postgraduate. If so, congratulations! Postgraduate study is exciting and stimulating if it is approached in the right way. It can lead to increased employment prospects, and it can change your life.

It is also true that postgraduate study brings significant challenges. As a postgraduate learning specialist, I regularly see students who say that postgraduate study is more difficult than they had expected. This is a natural reaction. The western education system demands increasingly more from students as they move to higher educational levels. The higher you go, the more independent and self-reliant you are expected to be.

The demands of postgraduate study are not simply in terms of a greater workload. One of the major challenges is to realise that your success as a postgraduate is entirely up to you. Few people will hold your hand and tell you what to do. Postgraduate study demands independence and self-reliance, qualities that are highly valued by employers. Naturally, the transition from a semi-dependent undergraduate to an independent postgraduate brings considerable challenges.

Before commencing postgraduate study in a western tertiary institution, you need to be aware of three things:

- the outcomes expected of you during your course of study;
- the types of assessment used in your intended Faculty;
- the expectations of you in terms of your oral and written work.

Awareness of these three is important for all students, but students from non-western backgrounds also need to understand a little about the western education system itself and what it means to be a postgraduate student within it.
2 Getting to know yourself

Activity: Getting to know yourself

The western academic environment values the ability to discuss and express one’s point of view. Students should not be afraid of expressing their point of view as often as possible. Usually a postgraduate class will begin with an ‘ice-breaker’ ice-breaker to encourage free exchange of ideas, and to allow you to meet fellow students. The following is an example of such an activity.

Imagine yourself in a classroom consisting of students from mixed backgrounds – i.e. western and eastern, male and female, of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Imagine some of your fellow students as well-dressed, professional people who are very confident in English. Spend a moment imagining a class in which you are a participant. Write down and practise your responses to the following discussion questions:

- Why have you come to a foreign country to study?
- What do you hope to learn?
- Why didn’t you consider studying in an institution in your own country?
- What is different (or special) about a western university education?
- How do western countries differ in general from your own country?
- How does the western education system differ from the education system in your own country?
- What do you like or dislike about the western education system so far? (If you have not yet started your course of study, what do you expect to like or dislike?)

If it helps, rehearse your answers in front of a mirror. Try to present a coherent verbal argument for each question (i.e. don’t just answer the first question with ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I wanted to experience something different’).

Let’s take the first question. Consider starting with a general introductory phrase that shapes your answer: ‘Well, there are really three main reasons why I chose to come to a foreign country to study: the first, and most important reason, was . . .’ (use different introductory phrases for each reason). Then, narrow this down to your detailed answer: ‘For these three reasons, I particularly wanted to see whether I could survive on my own in another country. I am not used to living away from my family, and not used to cooking and cleaning for myself. So, I thought it might be a good challenge to study overseas.’ End with a concluding sentence: ‘So these are the reasons why I wanted to study overseas.’ Your answers should be shaped like this:

```
General point
Specific detailed points
(evidence for general point)
Concluding sentence
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As we will see, the above structure, the ‘inverted triangle’, will be useful in many ways. It is a structure that is logically satisfying to the western mind, and it has many applications in writing as well as in speech.
3 Academic learning skills outcomes

As postgraduates you will be required to do exams and assignments. However, most of your assessment work as a postgraduate will consist of some or all of the following assessment tasks.

In addition to content knowledge, i.e. understanding of subjects, and a high degree of skill in computer literacy, postgraduate students are expected to demonstrate skills in a broad range of areas. These are listed below, along with the chapters in which they are covered. See the website for an activity where you can assess your skills in these areas:

- academic expectations, time and information management (chapters 1, 2 and 3);
- reading skills (chapter 4);
- referencing and citation systems (chapters 5–6);
- research skills (chapter 7);
- critical thinking (chapter 8);
- writing skills (chapters 9 and 15);
- writing critical reviews/literature reviews (chapters 10 and 14);
- writing empirical reports (chapter 11);
- writing research essays (chapters 12–13);
- seminar presentation and speaking skills (chapters 16–17);
- writing research proposals and starting a Ph.D. (chapters 18–19).

At the end of the book we will revisit these skills in relation to future studies and gaining employment. Before you move on, try the more general checklist at the end of this chapter. How confident do you feel in each of these areas? You will feel much more confident by the time you reach the end of the book than you did at the beginning.
4 The academic expectations of postgraduates

It is important to understand what the academic expectations are in western universities, as they may conflict with those of your home university. The advice in this chapter is based on broad generalisations, which are applicable to most – but not all – western universities. Western universities have a common tradition stemming from ancient Greece. While academic writing and speaking styles may differ between the different western language groups, this common tradition means that the academic culture of western universities is broadly similar. Thus, much of the advice here may be known by an international student who has studied in Spain or Germany, but may be new for a student whose previous university was in Saudi Arabia or Thailand.

This is not to say that education in western countries is intrinsically ‘better’ than education in other countries. Rather, the advice here is given to help you to adapt to what is expected of you at a foreign university, so that you can succeed. This will prepare you for the globalised workforce beyond the university, which is still largely dominated by English and western traditions.

1 Adult learning in western countries

Adult learners in western countries are expected to demonstrate the following skills:
- they should take an active role in their own learning;
- they should seek, hold, express and justify opinions;
- they should be willing to participate in organised discussions;
- they should contribute to team-work assignments when requested to do so;
- they are expected to approach academic staff for assistance when they require help;
- they should follow strict assessment procedures and guidelines, e.g. due dates for assignments, examination times;
- they should always express ideas in their own words when writing being careful to acknowledge the originator of the ideas;
- they should support ideas and opinions with evidence from a variety of peer-reviewed academic sources (‘peer-reviewed’ will be explained in a later chapter);
- they should be expected to think and write critically.

(Received from The Integrated Bridging Program, University of Adelaide)

2 Key aspects of the western academic tradition

1 Active learning

In Western countries, university students are not expected to passively accept as true the information provided by the lecturer. Students’ own ideas are valued and respected, and students are expected to contribute to the class. Questioning and critical thinking are also key to active learning; information and ideas should not be simply accepted by students. It is quite acceptable for students to question or even correct the lecturer.
At postgraduate level, students are expected to be active learners: to find things for themselves, think for themselves, disagree with the lecturer’s point of view (when this is appropriate) and do their own planning, timetabling of their workload and preparation for assignments. Thus, the lecturer–student relationship is viewed somewhat differently to what you may have experienced in your home university. This is one of the greatest adjustment difficulties that international students face.

Many students, especially those from Asian countries, are used to a more ‘passive’ approach to learning where lecturers ‘give information’ and students simply write it down. This approach is very different from the western academic approach where lecturers give minimal direction, make students arrive at the ‘answers’ themselves, and expect students to argue with them! Active learning and initiative in problem-solving are important skills, particularly in the workforce. In western countries this learning starts in universities. The quicker a student adapts to this study environment, the quicker they do well.

Lecturers often keep a record of the verbal contributions of students in the class, particularly in tutorials and seminars. Some lecturers keep a grade book for this purpose, ticking off students’ names or assigning ‘points’ for intelligent comments or critical responses to ideas raised in class. At the end of semester, they calculate the points and arrive at a ‘participation’ grade. If students have not participated or engaged actively with the material being discussed in classes, they receive ‘zero’ for participation.

Surprisingly, this expectation to contribute verbally and to be an ‘active’ and critical learner is not often made clear to students. The reason for this is historical. Many people regard active learning as the essence of a western tertiary education. These historical traditions go back to ancient Greece, the birthplace of the university system. (Sometimes active engagement is known as ‘Socratic dialogue’ after Socrates, one of the early Greek philosophers.) It is one of the main functions of the university to provide this opportunity for active learning and engagement, and students are expected to participate in it. It is good practice, therefore, to act and respond in class as though the teacher were silently giving students participation grades, because often they are (even though they may not have told the students).

Opportunities are provided for active learning and interaction in all postgraduate classes. These may take the following forms:
There are many other variations, all involving active learning by students. In the western university there is less emphasis on **teacher-centred learning** (where the teacher ‘gives’ information and students sit passively absorbing it) and more emphasis on **student-centred learning** (where students learn by doing something themselves). Student-centred learning allows opportunities for discussion, clarification of ideas and concepts and disagreement on the material being discussed. This has many benefits, not least of which is the development of English language skills. There is evidence to suggest that students learn better when they are actively involved in something.

The most common form of information delivery in universities are, of course, **lectures**, which are large-group, teacher-directed and teacher-centred classes. These are usually supplemented with **tutorials**, which are small-group, student-centred discussions. This practice is still common at undergraduate level, where hundreds of students attend a lecture followed by a smaller tutorial of 15 to 20 students. The purpose of the lecture is to impart information. The purpose of the tutorial is to discuss and critically analyse the material given in the lecture.

At postgraduate level, however, it is increasingly common to have a blend of the two formats in medium-sized classes (around 50 or more students in Australia; fewer in the US). This is called a **seminar**. At a seminar, students receive some lecturer-directed content and then are expected to discuss issues, either as a large group or in smaller ‘break-out’ groups. Break-out groups later reconvene in the larger group to present their ideas.

In seminars and tutorials ‘active’ participatory learning is crucial. Students need to demonstrate that they have read and understood the material being discussed, and they need to show that they have ideas and opinions of their own. This is not just appreciated or encouraged; it is the **purpose** of the seminar or tutorial discussion groups. If students are not contributing actively, they are simply not doing what is expected of them. In large seminars, it is particularly important to make verbal contributions as – if you stay silent – often the lecturer does not know that you understand the material, or have done the reading. In a sense, you need to ‘show off’ that you are keeping up with the reading and that you understand it. Again, it is good practice to treat every class discussion group as though the tutor or lecturer were silently assigning grades for participation. If you approach your classes in this way you can be sure that you will gain an acceptable participation grade.

### 2 Asking questions

Many international students are used to learning situations in which asking questions is considered to be inappropriate. In contrast, asking questions is encouraged in western
countries because this shows a desire for knowledge and also that the student is intelligent and willing to question things and seek clarification. If you are having trouble understanding something, it is likely that other students do not understand it either.

If you ask the lecturer to repeat or explain what you do not understand this helps the lecturer to understand what your problem is. They then know how to help you. Remember too that lecturers feel that students have experiences to contribute to class discussions. For example, you may have had experience working overseas. This kind of knowledge is invaluable and very much welcomed by lecturers. Do not be afraid to voice your views or opinions. It will make a good impression and possibly advance the class discussion. The opinions and perspectives that you bring as an international student can be particularly valued and can enrich the learning environment.

Asking questions is another aspect of active learning. Tutors and lecturers want to see evidence that students have engaged with the material being discussed. The best way to demonstrate this is by asking intelligent and relevant questions.

3 Seeking, holding and expressing opinions

In postgraduate education, you will succeed best if you are capable of seeking, holding and expressing opinions: preferably your own well-argued and justified opinions. You will be most likely to succeed if you are critical of information presented to you. ‘Critical’ can be defined in two ways: either as ‘finding fault’ (e.g. ‘She was criticised for not attending class’) or as ‘judging the merits or faults of something’. It is the second meaning that we intend when we use ‘criticise’ and ‘critical’ in the academic context of western countries. It is very important to understand this, because great value is placed on thinking about, questioning and analysing information at university. At the postgraduate level emphasis is given to the skills of criticising, being critical, and on thinking and writing critically. This is quite different from what is expected of undergraduate students at university. Undergraduates often simply accept information as being correct or true. By contrast, postgraduates are expected to be able to challenge received wisdom and come to their own conclusions.

You must endeavour to seek, hold and express opinions at all times on all topics. This means, on occasion, being critical of information presented to you. As noted earlier, some tutors will deliberately say something untrue in class, just to see which students in the class are being critical, and which are simply passively accepting everything they are being told.

Note this carefully now, as your success in being critical will – to a large degree – determine your grades. You will not get good grades by simply copying what the teacher tells you. Often lecturers and tutors are more impressed with students who actively disagree with the views presented in class (including their own). Of course, you cannot disagree with your tutor simply by finding fault with them or judging their views severely (‘critical’ in the first sense above). You must be critical in the second sense above, by weighing the pros and cons of an issue and giving compelling reasons for why you disagree with what the tutor is telling you. Your ability to demonstrate critical thinking is a vital part of your assessment as a postgraduate.
4 Participation

Some international students find it uncomfortable to participate actively. Education in most western countries encourages active participation by students, even in primary school. With practice and training, however, international students can participate very well. It is all a matter of good advice, deliberate practice, and confidence. Importantly, it is a matter of preparation and knowing what to expect.

Participating actively involves asking questions of the lecturer, but it also involves actively playing a role in assignments and tasks. This means that you are expected to take the initiative, lead discussions, offer comments, and criticise the views of others. If you do this politely and respectfully, this is not considered rude or aggressive.

5 Contributing to team-produced assignments

Contributing to team-produced assignments may constitute a large part of your assessment. Group work has become a vital part of assessment in most western universities. Team-produced assignments receive a team grade, sometimes with grades for each team member and an overall grade for the group. Many students do not respond well to group-work tasks, as they feel that they can do these assignments much quicker, and often better, individually. Some also complain about ‘lazy’ group members who drag down the group’s marks. There is some basis for these concerns. It is not easy to organise a team of people to produce a clearly argued and well-researched team assignment. Some students are unreliable, some are not interested in working hard, others have trouble with English writing skills, and so on.

However, the educational rationale for including group work as an assessment exercise is a sound one. Graduate students should acquire the skills of managing other people and themselves, such as delegating work, and setting and achieving team objectives. These are important skills for employment, as most jobs involve teamwork. Most teamwork assignments fail or do badly not because of the task itself, but because the individuals in the group were unable to manage the team to achieve the objectives that
were set. In group work, you are being assessed on these skills. Students themselves are responsible when teamwork projects do not go well. The point of the exercise is in managing the group, as well as performing the set task.

You may be paired to do group work with western students. You will be expected to contribute, verbally and in writing. If you don’t, you may be viewed by others as lazy or incompetent.

6 Approaching staff for guidance

You will be expected to take the initiative and ask your lecturer to explain if you do not know or understand something. In western countries it is not considered rude to ask a question during a lecture. Indeed, it is ruder not to seek clarification when a lecturer invites questions during a lecture and then later admit that you did not understand what was required. You should always ask even if you want only a minor clarification. Nothing is lost by asking, and much can be gained. You are expected to be proactive in terms of your own learning.

It is best to go straight to your lecturer or tutor with your questions, rather than asking your friends. It demonstrates that you are thinking about the material, are assertive and confident, and are eager to get it right. Other students can often be wrong or misinformed – if you don’t understand something, it is likely that your friends don’t understand it either. Again, it is important to note that, as a postgraduate, you are being assessed on these skills. Rather than laugh at you for asking a question, your lecturers will be impressed by your proactiveness, your interest and your dedication.

7 Following assessment procedures

In western countries, deadlines are final. Online submission is possible at many universities, and assignments are rigorously checked to ensure they are submitted on time. Lateness is unacceptable. There is no equivalent notion in western countries as the Indonesian concept of ‘rubber time’ (jam karet), where a deadline is treated as a vague commitment to something that can be ‘stretched out’. In western universities you will lose marks (usually 5 to 10 marks per day an assignment is late) unless you have a medical certificate. Often international students from Asia are surprised at how strict deadlines are in western countries. Work is due by 5 pm on the deadline day; submitted work will receive a date and time stamp to show whether it was on time or not.

Deadlines are important for reasons of equity. Strict deadlines mean that all students have the same amount of time to complete the assignment. Deadlines and strict timetables are also a cultural feature of western societies. In western society it is culturally unacceptable to be late, unless you have a valid reason.

Note: If you need an extension of time for a legitimate medical reason, normally university procedures will require that you must ask the lecturer first at least two weeks before the due date (there are variations on this in different universities). If you are sick on the day, you must submit medical evidence if you are unable to hand in work on time. Failure to consistently hand in work on time will result in overall failure for your course of study.
8 Expressing ideas in your own words

Students who do not express ideas in their own words, but instead copy other people’s words and ideas without acknowledgement are considered plagiarists. Plagiarism often demonstrates that a student is lacking in ideas and imagination or cannot understand the material given to them. In a worst-case situation, it demonstrates a student willing to ‘steal’ words and ideas from others. Sometimes plagiarism demonstrates that a student is genuinely unfamiliar with the cultural expectations of the western tertiary environment. It is essential that you learn how to express yourself in your own words. You must also understand plagiarism and its implications.

9 Supporting ideas with evidence

Postgraduates must provide supporting evidence for the statements and opinions expressed in their assignments. Your marks depend on your ability to back up your arguments with suitable evidence.

10 Thinking and writing critically

Critical thinking is central to university education in western countries. Thinking and writing critically allow you to argue your position in your essays, research papers and presentations. In your assessments, you will have to present your argument as a series of statements which lead logically to a conclusion, or as a series of partial conclusions leading to a final conclusion (see diagram below).

Consider the previous example of television. One partial conclusion is that television is entertaining owing to the large number of popular comedy and lifestyle shows that are available. You might argue that statistics show that this outweighs the number of programmes that are violent and in bad taste; and that, despite the popularity of such programmes, on balance there are more good than bad programmes. You might say
that television is, on balance, a good thing. Another partial conclusion is that television can promote good causes, such as fundraising for the victims of natural disasters. You could argue that this influence is greater than the ability of television to mislead and damage children. Adult programmes are only screened late at night, when children cannot see them, and as adults can clearly distinguish between fact and fiction, they are less easily led astray. Another partial conclusion weighs up the points that watching television is both relaxing and can promote laziness. You can argue that people who do not own a television set can also be lazy (that laziness is a state of mind), and that, on balance, television can be a positive source of relaxation if watched for only a few hours a day. These points lead to an overall conclusion that despite some bad points, television is a good thing for society.

5 The aim of postgraduate education

The ultimate aim of a western postgraduate education is to teach students how to think for themselves. Students make a significant adjustment in their learning styles, shifting their attitudes along a continuum of learning from ‘conserving’ attitudes to knowledge (reinforcing what can be summarised and described as being ‘correct’) to ‘extending’ attitudes to knowledge (where students themselves begin to pose their own speculative questions and make original contributions). There is also a need to move from ‘reproductive’ learning (simply repeating what you are told) to ‘analytical’ learning (being critical of what you are told) and, finally, ‘speculative’ learning (where students add their own original ideas). The extent to which students can make this transition largely determines how well they perform as a postgraduate. See the diagram on the following page (from Ballard & Clanchy, 1988).

In the ‘conserving’ and ‘reproductive’ style of learning, students are concerned with getting the ‘right’ answer and asking ‘what?’ questions: e.g. What is the answer to this problem? In western countries this kind of learning is common in school-level education and, to a lesser extent, in undergraduate education. There is a need to memorise and apply formulas. This is sometimes called surface learning.
At higher levels of education, especially in postgraduate studies, *critical thinking* becomes more important and students are expected to be more *analytical* in their approach. In postgraduate-level education there are often no ‘correct’ answers, only more or less plausible (believable) theories or views. Instead of being ‘correct’, students are expected to be able to *argue the case* for a particular position, or – even better – to *add something new* to a discussion on a topic. Moreover, students are expected to *question* information given to them, *assess* its validity and critique the assumptions lying behind the information. This is sometimes called *deep learning*.

At even higher levels of education (i.e. doctoral studies) students are expected to be more than merely critical and analytical; they are expected to be *speculative* as well: to come up with their own theories, or developments of a theory, and to ask speculative and *challenging* questions (‘What would happen if this was done/if this was changed? Would I get the same result? ’). In other words, they are expected to be intellectually *creative* and add to scholarship and knowledge at the highest levels.

Few students have the chance or opportunity to enter the world of speculative and *extending knowledge*. However, all intelligent postgraduate students should be able to perform well in the centre column of the above diagram, and frequently they can do even better than this. In general, the closer that a student *moves toward the right* in the diagram above, the better! At master’s degree-level original scholarship and creative knowledge are *not expected* of students. However, they are very welcome and encouraged. Students who demonstrate some degree of creative originality are often approached by academic staff to continue their studies by completing a research degree or even to begin a doctoral degree.
6 Summary

This chapter outlined the main skill areas needed for postgraduates. It does not cover more specific skills for ESL students. Other texts deal specifically with ESL study-skill issues and I recommend that students consult texts such as Lewis and Reinders (2003). Reinders, Moore and Lewis (2008) also provides useful information in relation to improving your language skills and vocabulary.

This chapter has also looked at the key elements of the western education system. In particular, it has discussed the expectations placed on postgraduates. The more quickly students can adjust to these expectations, the better are their chances of success.

7 A Confidence Checklist

### Organization

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<tr>
<th>Confidence</th>
<th>Low – High</th>
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<tr>
<td>Determining goals</td>
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<td>Managing time</td>
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<td>Seeking help</td>
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<td>Collecting and organising materials</td>
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<td>Identifying and following guidelines and deadlines</td>
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<td>Preparing for exams</td>
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<td>Performing in exams</td>
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<td>Maintaining motivation and managing stress</td>
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### Teamwork

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<th>Confidence</th>
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<td>Collaborating on team assignments</td>
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<td>Determining team roles</td>
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<td>Managing different approaches and adapting your own</td>
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<td>Assisting others</td>
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<td>Maintaining and monitoring progress</td>
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<td>Resolving problems and conflict</td>
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<td>Reviewing other students’ work and providing and receiving feedback</td>
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## Research and reading

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<th>Confidence</th>
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<td>Finding and retrieving sources</td>
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<td>Skimming and scanning texts</td>
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<td>Evaluating texts for relevance and reliability</td>
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<td>Reading and analysing texts carefully</td>
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<td>Going beyond the set readings</td>
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<td>Understanding and employing a range of theoretical models, methodologies and methods in your research</td>
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## Critical thinking

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<th>Confidence</th>
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<td>Selecting relevant and reliable texts</td>
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<td>Evaluating arguments</td>
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<td>Analysing, comparing and synthesising ideas</td>
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<td>Applying concepts, theories and models</td>
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<td>Predicting outcomes</td>
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<td>Developing questions and hypotheses</td>
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<td>Developing or selecting approaches to problems</td>
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<td>Developing opinions, solutions and recommendations</td>
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<td>Being curious, flexible and willing to change positions</td>
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## Speaking and listening

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<th>Confidence</th>
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<td>Giving oral presentations</td>
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<td>Using communication technologies</td>
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<td>Participating in seminars</td>
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<td>Listening actively and respectfully</td>
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<td>Taking notes</td>
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<td>Arguing for and against ideas and agreeing and disagreeing</td>
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<td>Expressing and supporting positions</td>
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<td>Asking and answering questions</td>
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## Writing

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<td>Writing clearly, accurately and persuasively</td>
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<td>Following appropriate text conventions</td>
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<td>Referencing appropriately</td>
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<td>Paraphrasing, summarising and quoting directly</td>
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<td>Referring to other texts critically</td>
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<td>Presenting and supporting arguments</td>
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## Information technology

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