

SAGE

Study Skills

Studying and Learning *at* University

Vital Skills for Success in Your Degree

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Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

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Introduction

You are probably looking at this book because you feel that you might need something extra to help you with settling into your role of undergraduate. You may be feeling anxious about the demands that will be made of you and perhaps feeling that everybody else will know already what to do, how to behave, how to get down to work and to take part in everything else that might be expected of you. The point to bear in mind at times like this is that everybody is new. Even the slightly older students, even those who exude confidence, even those who seem to have inside knowledge, are all new to the same things that you are new to. Whether they choose to discuss their worries and weaknesses is a different matter. Most, probably all, new students are anxious about how they will approach their work. They are not sure, no matter how successful they might have been in previous settings, whether they will be able to manage in their new setting. You should rest assured that in the same way as some people are ill at ease in some social situations, but manage not to show it, there will be an overwhelming majority who are anxious in their new guise of university student.

This book cannot instantly resign your concerns to history, but it can provide many pointers, strategies and suggestions as well as a good deal of background, and even foreground, information that will help you devise a way of working which fits in with your new-found opportunities for socialising, which you really should capitalise on, in what can seem like a strange new world.

The title of this book implies that universities are places of study, and also of learning. Both of these activities should be active and not passive. All too often, in supposed learning situations the would-be learner is expected to remain passive and to internalise whatever is presented to them. This actually works for some; for others there is often only a partial absorption of what is presented. For the rest, the time spent as a passive member of an audience is not particularly beneficial.

Most university teaching includes lectures; lectures can be times of passive loss of interest. The learner must take steps to stay awake and be actively involved in the proceedings. It is because some university teaching is not as good as it could be that a book of this nature can help those new to the arena to become active and receptive learners able to take full advantage of the opportunity for study at a higher level.

The opening chapter of *Studying and Learning at University* briefly outlines the constructivist view of learning. This view suggests that learning takes place through engagement and activity, and that learning is indeed an active process. It does not take long to realise that the mainstay of much university course teaching is the lecture; what more passive way of learning could be invented without resorting to indoctrination during sleep? An old university joke describes a lecturer as someone who talks in your sleep, and for some this is not far from the truth. The purpose of this book is not to shake up the university teaching force – there are many members of that force who are not in need of a shake-up anyway – but to allow full participation in the process of studying and learning no matter in what higher education teaching context you find yourself.

The first chapter is recommended as essential reading as it gives an insight into the processes which underpin your learning, whether you realise it or not. It also provides thoughts about how best to proceed with the tasks faced by those new to higher level study, in a situation where, unlike most schools, the teachers are not always on hand to provide minute-by-minute support. Those teaching in universities have a range of pressing commitments and duties apart from teaching. The typical academic contract includes one-third for research, one-third for teaching (including preparation, marking and organisation) and one-third for administrative duties, such as unit, departmental and university committees, admissions, exam boards, and module and course co-ordination. This is why you will be left to work independently and why at times you may well feel isolated. Obviously to become an independent learner is an aim that you should be working towards, but the sudden change from school to university can come as a shock. Some universities give higher importance to research than others and it is sometimes the case that teaching in these universities is given a lower priority than one might expect. This can be seen as a necessary result of the financial implications of good and excellent performance in the regular national assessment of university research output, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), in which all universities are rated according to their output and excellence in research and from which follows a large proportion of their funding.

Another fairly widely accepted point is that lecturers are not necessarily good teachers (though it must be said that many are very good teachers); they are often appointed as a result of their research record, not their successful teaching. There are naturally a great many counter-examples to this and it is likely that you will be taught by some inspired teachers and you will benefit, in many cases, from a high level of professionalism and attention to detail. However it could be the case that some of your lecturers may not have had training or preparation for the teaching elements of their job. This is changing, however. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) takes a great interest in teaching and teaching standards in universities and provides prestigious accreditation to university teachers who meet the required standard of excellence in teaching. Many universities run internal programmes of training in university teaching, some of which lead to accreditation by the HEA, and many of which are mandatory for new members of staff.

Using this book

Chapter 1: The purpose of this chapter is to give you insight into the processes of learning and what we currently understand about it. It will also provide a consideration of how learning might be optimised. This chapter underpins much of what follows and there are references made to the content of Chapter 1 throughout the book.

Chapter 2: Since effective reading is a crucial element of study at university, this chapter is devoted to it. Even the seemingly most efficient, or the speediest, of readers do not always operate as efficiently as they might. This chapter suggests strategies for improving your reading and, importantly, coming to a better understanding of what you read.

Chapter 3: Having easy access to what you have read, or to the content of lectures, at a later date is another crucial element of your work. If you allow your note-taking to become a cumbersome or chaotic affair you will not benefit from looking back at your notes when the time comes to write an assignment, or to revise for exams. There is probably nothing worse than looking at what you imagined were meaningful and incredibly helpful notes, only to find that what you are looking at has no meaning for you at all. Writing too much is sometimes as bad as writing too little. This chapter looks at different approaches to keeping a record of your work, and relates it to learning through the process of engagement.

Chapter 4: In order to learn from the work and writing of others you need to have access to it. You could buy every book on your reading list, and a few more besides, but this is not at all realistic. In any case much of what you need to consult will be in the form of journal articles or reports. You need to be a skilled user of the library and its related services if you want to be efficient and economical with your, all too precious, time. This chapter introduces the multitude of advanced library facilities, beginning with classification systems, but going far beyond the simple numbering of books.

Chapter 5: The information that you need will be traceable via the medium of the internet in many cases. The library will give access to electronic versions of most academic journals, but there is a new world of high speed, well-targeted searching of wholly academic material in virtual work areas such as those provided by Google Scholar and similar dedicated academic sites. The dangers of falling into the trap of internet-mediated, cut and paste plagiarism, whether intentional or not, are considered, as are the consequences. There is more detail and advice about avoiding plagiarism in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6: Assessment arrangements are usually at the forefront of most student minds when they begin a new module; certainly more questions are asked in the first session about the assessment than any other topic. This chapter deals with the mainstay of ongoing assessment (as opposed to the traditional exam), the essay. How to plan, write

and, most importantly, how to develop an argument in your writing, is covered. Dissertations too are considered in detail. The importance to the academic fraternity of clear and accurate referencing is also outlined.

Chapter 7: To balance the chapter devoted to essay writing this chapter considers the other types of assessment that you are likely to encounter. Report writing, which is more common in science-based subjects, is dealt with and the whole process of examinations is also covered.

Chapter 8: Increasingly, sometimes for purposes of assessment but at other times too, you will be asked to make a presentation. A well-planned and executed presentation can be a pleasure for both audience and presenter; the converse is also true – a badly planned and poorly delivered presentation can serve no purpose but to embarrass the presenter and bore the audience. This chapter looks at the basics of planning and of producing the sort of visual aids which seem to be mandatory in the world of technology – although just because PowerPoint can produce a virtual firework display with your words hidden amongst the stunning whistles and bells, does not mean that you should aim at impressing the audience with the excesses of electronic style over content.

Finally, there is a glossary of common university terms and jargon, including some mysterious acronyms and many other related terms.

Transferable skills and the qualities of a graduate

The notion of ‘graduateness’ is covered late in the book, and you might want to peruse Appendix 1 before you move on to using the rest of the book in earnest. We consider the nature of the features that a degree-level education should provide to a successful graduate. It has been said that the important elements of an education are those that remain after the factual content has been forgotten, and there is a lot in that idea. This not only refers to the skills of finding out and of reasoning, which of course a graduate education should provide, but to a whole range of other transferable skills which will serve well in a world of increasing complexity and technological advance. Above all, graduates should be skilled communicators across a range of different contexts and media. The aim of this book is to help in the process of dealing with the potential difficulties faced by those new to university study, and to help in achieving the status of well-rounded, knowledgeable and skilled graduate, ready to face the challenges of the next stage of study, of career, or of whatever you choose to do next.