University of Worcester

Learning at university

Higher education

Before you go to university or enter 'higher education' for the first time there are many different aspects to consider. Uppermost in your mind will probably be thoughts about where you'll live, balancing family life and other responsibilities, financial issues and the social life. Consequently there is a danger you may not begin to think about the learning itself until the first coursework assignment is due. This study advice sheet has been prepared to provide an insight into what studying for a degree may be like and offers practical ideas to help you to make the most of university learning opportunities as soon as you arrive.

What is university learning?

The formal contact times with university teachers, usually referred to as tutors, will introduce you to, and develop, not only the *knowledge* associated with different subject areas but also various supporting *skills*. Skills are practically-based to enable you, for example, to carry out laboratory or field work and also to help you to complete coursework assignments such as essay writing, questionnaire design or finding information. Only *you* can put both knowledge and skills into practice in order to develop your abilities to a sufficiently high standard to attain a degree. The most important aspect of studying at university, therefore, is the work that you undertake independently of the tutors, either on your own, or with other students.

Contents

Learning at university gives you a chance to:

- assume responsibility for your own work

- choose subject areas directly related to your own interests

- focus in detail on specific work projects you have chosen

- work with other students, drawing from their experiences and strengths

- participate in a wide variety of teaching approaches

- acquire many marketable skills such as those of team work, personal organisation and communication

The learning process

In order to learn effectively you need to be aware of the process of learning so that you are not just improving what you know but how you learn.

There are four main factors for learning effectively:

- **Wanting to learn**
  Motivation and a sense of purpose

- **Learning by doing**
  Practising, making mistakes

- **Feedback from others**
  Leading to positive feelings about what has been learned

- **Reflection**
  Reviewing and making sense of what has been learned

Teaching and assessment

University teaching

Teaching at university can be very different from school, college and community learning. You are likely to encounter some or all of the following teaching elements:

- **Lecture**

This is what most people consider to be the main element of university teaching, although lectures will be only one part of your teaching timetable. It is generally the only type of teaching to allow all students on the same or related programmes to come together. You will need to take your own notes but handouts detailing key areas may be provided.

- **Seminar**

This consists of a number of students, typically fifteen to thirty, and one tutor, with the emphasis on group discussion. Students may be asked to prepare presentations for the rest of the group. Seminars can also be held by visiting experts or postgraduate students in a particular discipline, to raise awareness of departmental staff and students to new research and publications.

- **Tutorial**

In subject-based tutorials you will work in a small group with one tutor. Group sizes will vary from a few students up to as many as fifteen. Tutorials often focus on one particular topic or an assignment you have been set. It is a good way to take part in discussions and to get to know departmental staff. Personal tutorials are usually one-to-one and provide individual attention on more general academic and pastoral issues. These can be useful opportunities for personal development planning.

- **Practicals**

These involve experimental or research tasks in a laboratory or workshop giving you the chance to work through topics on a practical level. A major element of most science, design and engineering courses, they provide the opportunity to learn skills associated with putting theory into practice.

- **Self-guided study**

Students are asked to work through pre-prepared materials at their own pace, often involving self-assessment exercises and opportunities for skills practice. Materials may either be paper or computer based and can include audio or video media. This form of study is sometimes referred to as **resource-based** or **open learning.**

- **Computer-aided learning (CAL)**

Computers are being increasingly used to support the learning process. For example, computer-led tutorials take the student through a body of knowledge for revision or remedial support; computer simulations perform investigations and experiments.

What is assessment?

Assessment is an invaluable and important part of your learning. It is a way of maintaining standards and recognising levels of achievement. Assessment can enhance your performance by:

- increasing your motivation and focus
- offering the opportunity for feedback and reflection

> **Reflecting on how well you have done in an assessment consolidates your learning, preparing you for the next stages.**
>
> *See the Learning Journals advice sheet for further guidance on reflection.*

As tutors in higher education adopt new ways of teaching there is now much more to assessment than just sitting in an exam hall. New methods can involve students in assessing their own work (**self-assessment**) or that of other students (**peer assessment**).

Actively involve yourself in the process of assessment by finding out what you are expected to do and setting yourself appropriate goals.

At some time during your studies you are likely to have assessments marked automatically by computer, or more likely, using a sheet which will be read by an optical mark reader (OMR). Marking is quick and accurate and provides immediate feedback on areas for improvement.

A different learning environment

Key differences

Some key areas of contrast between school or college learning environments and those of higher education are likely to be:

- **Large lectures, especially in the first year**

Formal lectures with 150 or more students are not uncommon on some programmes. The only restriction on numbers may be the size of the lecture theatre.

- **Large numbers of teaching staff**

There will probably be large numbers of staff involved in your teaching, each with his/her own specialist knowledge of highly specific fields of study. Teaching is only one part of a tutor's work but, although they may sometimes seem to be remote, they do want to help you, so don't be afraid to ask questions. In tutorials and practicals you may be supervised by teaching assistants or research students.

- **Independent and group work**

Although you will work on your own most of the time, the need to work in a group with other students may be an integral part of your study. Even if you prefer to work alone there may not be a choice. Sometimes you are assessed on the outcomes of group projects.

- **Large amounts of unstructured time**

On many programmes (less so on science and engineering-based courses) there are large blocks of 'free' or non-contact time when you are expected to undertake private study. You may find it hard to discipline yourself to use this time wisely.

- **No one to "push" you**

If you are living away from family and friends for the first time there may not be anyone around to actively encourage you to study.

- **Wide-ranging resources and facilities**

The chances are that the facilities and resources available to assist you in your studies are the best you'll ever have at your disposal. Apart from departmental resources there will be library, computing and media facilities, careers and counselling services, not to mention the Students' Union. Make it your business to find out what is on offer.

At university the emphasis is on self-responsibility and self-management. You will need to create your own study framework, organise your time and prioritise different tasks.

Developing learning skills

Your study programme and assessments should help you to develop and enhance a range of skills which will be important to you, not only now as a student, but also when seeking employment. Such skills, which may also be referred to as **transferable, key or core skills**, include:

- time management
- team work
- oral presentations
- written communication
    - essays
    - reports
- note taking
- reading efficiently
- revision and exam skills
- assessment
    - self-assessment
    - peer assessment
    - using feedback
- information technology
- using the library, and information gathering

Supportive strategies

To help you find your feet quickly and get into the right frame of mind for learning:

- Become familiar with your programme requirements, read relevant guides, talk to tutors and other students

- Identify and visit central facilities and services

- For more tips on learning at university, check out the 'Moving On' publication, available from your SOLE page

- Reflect on your strengths and weaknesses:
    - what do you do well?
    - What could you do better?

- Use the checklist overleaf

Further information

This Study Advice Sheet has been produced by Student Services at UW.

We support student learning across the University through the publication of materials such as these.

Other study advice sheets that you may find useful include:

Essay Writing

Learning journals

Making oral presentations

Minimising stress

Organising yourself

Reading efficiently

Revision and exam skills

Study at distance

Taking notes

Using feedback to improve your work

What does the question mean?

Working in groups

Writing reports

All study advice sheets are available to view and download on the following website:

www.worcester.ac.uk/studyskills

or you can follow the links from your SOLE page.

You may also find it useful to check out the '**Moving On'** pack, accessible from the link on your SOLE page.

'**Moving On'** is a study skills package specifically designed to help you prepare for Higher Education & to become a successful student.

Contact: studyskills@worc.ac.uk

First weeks' learning checklist
A checklist of questions to help you through those vital first weeks

Programme

- Have I read through my course handbook and Institute guide?

- Do I know the aims and objectives of my course of study?

- How will my course be assessed?

- What are the relative weightings for assessed work?

- When are the coursework submission dates?

- How do I contact my personal academic tutor? What is his/her e-mail address?

Computing

- Where are the communal computing facilities? When can I use them?

- How do I access the university network?

- How do I find my e-mail address?

- Can my own computer be networked to the university system?

- Are there workshops or other forms of guidance to help students develop their I.T. skills?

Library

- What are the library's opening times in and out of term-time?

- What type and number of items am I allowed to borrow (e.g. books, journals, reports, videos) and for how long?

- Is there special provision for accessing the recommended reading material on my course?

- Which section of the library holds books on my subject?

- What guidance is offered for users, e.g. workshops, guided tours, leaflets, audio-visual aids?

Learning

- Does the university have study skills materials to support students?

- Are there central or departmental study workshops for students?

- Does my Institute recommend any books or other materials on learning skills?

- Is there any written or networked material specific to this university?