



SAGE ESSENTIAL STUDY SKILLS

A faded, light green background image showing two students, a man and a woman, sitting at a desk and looking at a computer monitor. The woman is pointing at the screen while the man looks on.

Studying @ University

How to be a Successful Student



David McIlroy

Studying @ University

SAGE Essential Study Skills

is a series of books designed to help students and newly qualified professionals to develop their skills, capabilities, attitudes and qualities so that they can apply them intelligently and in ways which will benefit them on their courses and careers. The series includes accessible and user friendly guides to improving a range of essential life-long skills and abilities in a variety of areas, including:

Writing essays and reports,

numeracy,

presenting information,

and communicating your ideas

Essential Study Skills will be an invaluable aid to all students on a range of higher education courses and professionals who need to make presentations, write effective reports or search for relevant information.

E *ssential Study Skills*

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how to be a successful
student

David McIlroy



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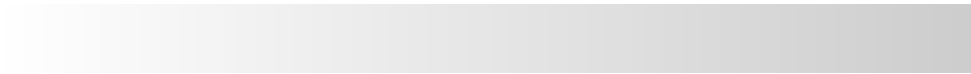
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Foreword

This book, and the series of which it is a part, is designed to help you be successful on your course, your career and in your life.

If you are just starting your course or thinking about improving your skills for work then this book will be an invaluable aid. It will help you to develop in an easy to use way skills and abilities in:

Writing essays and reports.

Numeracy.

Presenting information.

Communicating your ideas.

Using this book and others in the series will help you to gain more **confidence** in your writing, presentation skills and using computers. You will **learn how to learn** and to **transfer your skills** to new situations and problems in your studies and career.

Academic and vocational courses at most universities make many competing demands on students. Further and higher education is very diverse and asks many things from students. Consider the following:

Most courses are now modularised. This means there is a diversity of methods for assessment which means different kinds of skills and qualities are demanded for success.

What this book will give you

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Why an Essential Study Skills Series?

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There is a greater emphasis on independent learning. This means more pressure on tutors who have little time to teach study skills and more pressure on students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Information in the world's libraries and databases is doubling every five years. This requires an ability to manage information more efficiently for effective use in learning situations and for skills in literature searching.

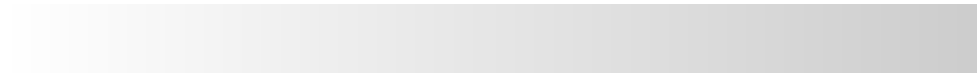
Regulatory bodies have set skills benchmarks. In the UK all courses of education have to set minimum benchmarks for transferable skills. These are built into the assessment criteria of modules and courses.

Professionals are required to demonstrate continuing skills development. This means there is a need for skills books that are relevant to the modern world.

Students are required not only to be literate, numerate and have computer competency but to acquire and exhibit capabilities, attitudes and qualities necessary for inclusion in the modern world. This book and the others in the series will teach you the necessary skills and also provide you with the capabilities to think for yourself and the attitudes to apply your knowledge and qualities, which will define your character. Our approach to skills, which you can see in the following table, is one that includes acquiring technical abilities in terms of the development of you as a person for maximising opportunities during your studies and transferring these for success in the diverse, changing and competitive world beyond university.

The series has been designed to help you develop your skills, capabilities, attitudes and qualities so that you can apply them intelligently and in ways that will benefit you in your course and employment. Using the series from the start of your course and in your job will make you more effective, efficient, confident and more able to take on new and exciting challenges in your life.

Chris Hart
Series Editor



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Standard expectations of the graduate



Skills	Capabilities	Attitudes	Qualities
Brevity and succinctness	Synthetical thinking	Proactive	Integrity
Budget construction	Analytical thinking	Responsive	Objectivity
Citation and attribution	Teaching and Instructing	Ethical	Honesty
Copy-editing	Facilitating	Positive	Leadership
Decision making	Argument analysis	Discretion	Self-confidence
Defining and classifying	Deductive and inductive Reasoning	Trustworthy	Adaptability
Document design	Effective thinking	Responsible	Assertiveness
Drafting and editing	Information needs evaluation	Persuasive	Openness
Essay writing	Evaluation techniques	Self-awareness	Determination
Financial management	Problem definition	Visionary	Finisher
Indexing	Solution identification	Cultural awareness	Self-discipline
Information finding	Setting criterion	Reflective practitioner	Sociability
Innovation	Managing change	Anthropological orientation	Empathetic understanding
Interpersonal communication	Managing projects	Research orientation	Motivator
Letter and memo writing	Team working	Self-development	Experimentation
Meeting deadlines	Understanding group dynamics	Self-control	Sociological stance
Negotiation	Contextualising	Inter-disciplinary	Self-evaluative
Networking	Intuition and insightfulness		Sense of humour
Non-verbal communication	Understanding principles		Playfulness
Numeracy and statistics	Self-management		Story telling
Oral presentation	Concept mapping		Consistency

(Continued)

(Continued)

Skills	Capabilities	Attitudes	Qualities
Political awareness	Graphical		
Position paper writing	presentation		
Problem solving	Self-marketing		
Proposal writing	Stress recognition and management		
Record keeping	Conflict resolution		
Report writing	Self-teaching		
Target setting	Understanding		
Time management	issues		
Use electronic communication	Giving and receiving feedback		
Use ICT effectively	Consequence assessment		
Write fluent and effective text	Concept application		
	Theory application		
	Model use and construction		
	Data management		
	Information process		
	understanding		
	Information flow		
	understanding		

Introduction

has not been constructed as the typical heavy duty academic textbook, but has rather been designed to help students navigate their way through the many exacting tasks that face them throughout their academic life. It has been prepared as a 'companion guide' that students can use again and again at every phase in their undergraduate programme. The book can be read from cover to cover because of its applied and illustrative style, but can also be consulted for particular spheres of interest as the need arises.

A sad reality for many students is that they are only beginning to acquire the qualities that enable them to achieve personal excellence as their academic career is drawing to an end. Therefore the sooner students are alerted to the strategies that will help them maximise their potential, the better equipped they will be to seize the opportunities that seem to go as quickly as they come at university or college. An important aim in the book is to point students toward the full range of qualities that help turn an average student into a very good student, and also to highlight factors that will help in motivation toward achievement.

In the eleven chapters that follow, the student is presented with a journey through the academic life. Most of the material is generic to academia and is therefore useful to students from a wide range of academic disciplines. For example, all students need listening skills, communication skills, note-taking and writing abilities, computing competence, organisational skills, examination/test strategies and many may need to develop numeric fluency. Moreover, a recurrent theme in the book is the acquisition of qualities derived from the academic course which will enhance employment prospects. Undergraduates are encouraged throughout the book to cultivate, recognise and document the qualities that will give them the competitive edge in the job market after graduation. Chapter 1 will be particularly helpful for new students in making the adjustment to university/college life, but the practices inculcated will also be useful for more experienced students. Most study guides highlight benefiting from lectures, taking notes, reading, organisational skills and using the library. In addition to these

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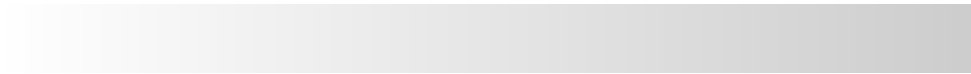
he study guide

this book also includes chapters on numeracy, computing, presentations, job applications, memory techniques, examination/test strategies and writing practical reports.

Sprinkled throughout the book are a series of simple exercises and these are contained in text boxes. These exercises may be attempted as they are encountered or alternatively left until the whole chapter has been read. However, some exercises require the student to use the library, email or to interact with other students. Again the aim has been to make the exercises as generic as possible so that they will appeal to the widest range of students. Moreover, the exercises are related to everyday life experiences and are generally well within the scope of students' repertoire of knowledge (although also designed to stretch and challenge!).

Other features of the book are the icons used throughout to highlight the illustrations, exercises, examples and guidelines. All illustrations are coded and are clearly related to a section heading. Text labelled 'example' either presents an example of the point under discussion or identifies some other important point to be emphasised. Finally, text highlighted in green is related to a central aim stated in the book – that is, it points to the path for success at university/college or identifies key skills for learning and achievement. Each chapter is also preceded by a list of key concepts that give a flavour of what the chapter is about, and concludes with summary boxes that present a synopsis of the chapter's content.

It is hoped that students who read the book will not only commit themselves to work hard at their studies, but will also discover the strategies that will help them channel their energies in the direction that facilitates economy of work and efficiency of performance. It is hoped that the book will be as enjoyable to read as it has been to write, and that the enjoyment derived from reading the book and attempting the exercises will spill over into enthusiasm for academic endeavours.



Getting Adjusted to University

LINKS AND BRIDGES COGNITIVE SCHEMA TEACHING,
LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES
EXCITEMENT AND APPREHENSION FRIENDSHIPS AND FUN MODULE
OUTLINES LIBRARY SERVICES SUPPORT SERVICES SPECIFIC PROBLEMS
SAFETY NETS REINFORCEMENTS HABITUATION CO-ORDINATION
TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

The first message for new students is a welcome to a 'new world' that can now be adopted as your 'home from home' over the next few years. In many ways university is a world apart, a world of its own and is comprised of students from a wider range of backgrounds than you may have been previously accustomed to. There is also a diversity of staff – teaching, research, administration, technical, catering, cleaning and maintenance. In your three or four years at university you will probably be exposed to a diversity of teaching staff and each for only a short period of time.

For many students university will be the central point of their lives, with their living quarters in close proximity. The university becomes the hub around which all else rotates. However, the primary purpose for the university's existence is to be a centre of excellence in teaching, learning and assessment. It is there to prepare and equip students with a range of skills and expertise that will enable them to go on and fulfil a useful career. Presumably, most students who arrive at university have good motivation and high expectations. Although the end result for the new student may seem a long

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KEY CONCEPTS

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In the beginning

WELCOME TO A NEW WORLD

way off, the consistent testimony of students who have graduated is that they scarcely know where the time has gone. Welcome then to the new world of activity and aspiration, where there is a great buzz of excitement in the air!

Many do not make it to university either because they have not satisfied the entrance requirements or life's circumstances have not permitted them the luxury of a third level education. The university will only accept those they consider have what it takes to survive the rigours of a degree or diploma programme. Congratulations – you have passed the acid test and you should feel assured that you have been given the selectors' vote of confidence. There are likely to be moments when you doubt your own ability or tenacity to progress any further. At times like these it is important to remember the long, hard journey that brought you into third level education and the many daunting obstacles you successfully negotiated. Therefore, allow yourself to indulge in some self-congratulation. Of course there will be no room to rest smugly on your laurels, but it is good to remind yourself that you have had to develop considerably to reach the point where you are now at, and there should be no reason to doubt that your progress is set to continue.


In every new day that you face it can be said, 'today is the first day of the rest of your life'. However this saying is especially relevant to momentous occasions that mark the dawning of a new phase of life. That is certainly true of the student's arrival at university. There are new opportunities, new challenges, new people to meet and a whole set of novel circumstances to encounter. All previous achievements in one sense do not count for anything now, in that they do not contribute directly to degree classification. However they do count in that the student would not be at university without them, and all the solid habits learned in association with them will have continued usefulness. Moreover, there is now a fresh opportunity to remedy any weaknesses that may have previously impaired the fulfilment of potential.



CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR ARRIVAL

THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

At the beginning of the new sports season, the team that won the league and the team that just avoided relegation in the previous season, both start in exactly the same position. Similarly, researchers have consistently found that in most disciplines, how students performed academically



Although university will present many novel situations and circumstances to the new student, there will also be many aspects of university life that will be familiar. If that were not the case, the new student would probably withdraw under the pressure of being entirely overwhelmed. Before arriving at university students will have already acquired experiences not unlike those they will encounter after university entrance. For example, they will have already sat tests, completed assignments, learned to read and quote from a variety of sources, worked to deadlines and have had some familiarity with the use of a library and a computer. Therefore the challenging new experiences will not be totally 'uncharted waters', and students can use their past accumulated experience as a reference point and guide to the less familiar. If the fear of the unknown is a trigger for anxiety, reference to past experience can become an antidote to it.



If you eat in a particular restaurant regularly, you will be well aware of all the procedures associated with taking your seat, reading the menu, ordering from the waitress, leaving a tip, paying for the meal etc. When you go to another restaurant, you may notice differences in the details of the procedure – for example, all courses ordered at once rather than at intervals, and different procedures associated with payment of bills. Various restaurants have differences in the procedures but this should not cause any consternation to patrons. Each patron has a mental map or cognitive schema for using restaurants and all that is required is some accommodation to a new situation. There is a clear advantage over the person who has never been in a restaurant in their life. Likewise your cognitive schema for teaching, learning and assessment will have to be adjusted at university to accommodate the novel aspects. You will have frames of reference from school, night school, technical college etc. that will act as a bridge to the less familiar and keep your anxieties under control.

prior to university entrance is not a great predictor of their levels of achievement at undergraduate level (Peers & Johnston, 1994; Wolfe & Johnson, 1995).

NOT TOTALLY A STEP IN THE DARK

A cognitive schema

Within the first few weeks of the new student's experience at university, it is not uncommon to feel swamped or overwhelmed with much new material to assimilate and so many new situations to become accustomed to. Some new students may feel at first like a stranger in a strange land, and students prone to anxiety may feel that it is all a little too much for them. In the following paragraphs and in the remainder of the chapter, potential difficulties will be addressed one by one. For the present, the primary advice is to brace yourself for this kind of reaction and ensure that you do nothing rash. The feeling of being overwhelmed will come under control sooner rather than later. However, the more you are convinced that these feelings are controllable, the sooner you will actually find that they are. It is good to find a friend, family member or fellow student to talk to who will help to allay your fears and put your perceptions into perspective.

On my first day at university there were two lecturers that introduced the first module. Their introductory talk was in a lecture theatre that was filled almost to capacity with first year students who, like me, had just arrived at university. First year students from various disciplines shared common modules in the first year and then went their separate ways into their various specialities. There was an unforgettable feeling of excitement from being associated with those who had made it thus far and who were aspiring to work their way toward a satisfying, rewarding professional career. There was a detectable buzz of anticipation and an air of expectancy. However, these feelings were tempered with some apprehension about what was going to unfold in the next few weeks. There were questions in the minds of some of us such as, 'will I be able to keep up to speed with the demands of this course?' 'Will I be able to put the quality of work required into the assignments and within the deadlines imposed?' 'Would some of us end up feeling that we were out of place in this environment and realise that we had turned in the wrong direction in the pursuit of a career?' It is not unnatural for feelings of inadequacy and questions of uncertainty to enter the mind at this early stage at university. The antidote to these feelings is to resolve to prove yourself by planned study, concerted and committed endeavour and determination to persevere even when apparent setbacks occur.



I will survive

THE SWAMPED FACTOR

LECTURE THEATRES (EXCITEMENT AND APPREHENSION)



At the first lecture associated with each new module, there is likely to be a presentation of the planned outline for the module and a handout to accompany this. Every student should pull out all the stops to ensure attendance at the introductory lectures and to avail themselves of any handouts that are provided. These lectures are likely to furnish students with additional detail and they should therefore be ready to make supplementary notes. If lecturers make notes available on websites do not hesitate to access these and to extract all relevant learning material.



If you are determined to develop a good study strategy at university or college, then a good starting point would be to memorise the outline plan for each module. This should not be too difficult given that there may be around eight major topics within a module. The sequence in which the themes appear is likely to be ordered in a logical and coherent manner. Consider being given the task of navigating in a long car journey through many towns and villages with the use of a convenient road map. The best strategy might be to acquire an overall feel before the start of the journey for the direction you are likely to take. Some familiarity with the names of the main cities and towns you have to pass through would be a great advantage. As you arrive at each juncture you will be reassured that you are on track to reach your destination. You can continue to check your map at various points and stops in the journey. The whole task will have been made a lot less onerous by early familiarity with the map. By the time you come to making the return trip you will probably have a good 'cognitive map' of the route. In terms of university experience, the return journey can be likened to the period of revision. By the time you reach the revision stage, you should know where each of the subjects in the module fits into the overall scheme of things. Ensure, therefore, that you have a panorama of each module right from the outset and refer to it regularly along the journey.

OUTLINE OF THE MODULES

Plotting the way ahead

Prior to university entrance, many students may have only worked with a limited number of set text books which they were expected to treat as the Bible for a given subject. Perhaps all that was needed to master a subject was knowledge of the set book, and this may have required intensive effort. At university the strategy of reading within a limited range is left behind for the most part. However, the first year at university may not necessarily be more difficult than the final school year. Some students have claimed that their last year at school was more exacting and demanding in many ways than their first year at university. This may be because universities purposefully design the first year of their courses to allow students to ease into the new environment and learn the strategies required for optimal achievement in the degree programme. The ultimate aim is that students should be able to cite evidence and use references from a good variety of sources. This entails abandoning the practice of reading every textbook from cover to cover unless that has been specifically signalled. Moreover, students may not even need to read complete journal articles or book chapters – perhaps only one page, or a few paragraphs, or one abstract or table of results is essentially relevant to the point under discussion in a given assignment. Or if you read an article right through once you can learn to highlight the parts that you can refer to later. Economy and selectivity are of the essence in study at university.

Therefore do not be intimidated by the long list of references for each module. Your tutor may guide you to some of the key articles that give a good overview of the entire subject.

Many students do not fulfil their potential, not because of any deficiency in their ability, but because they fail to develop a sound study strategy. Even the most talented students will not achieve optimally if they, for example, attempt to begin and complete several assignments a few days before the deadlines. Most tutors will provide assignment titles and submission dates well in advance.

. Once you have the seeds of these articles embedded in your mind, you will be likely to attend to relevant information that you encounter in lectures or reading that other students may miss.




LONG LIST OF REFERENCES

One of the keys to success at university is to learn not to spend excessive time reading superfluous material, no matter how much it may interest you. The secret is to read selectively and to condense the reading into carefully marshalled arguments.

DEADLINES FOR ASSIGNMENTS (IN SHORT SEMESTERS)

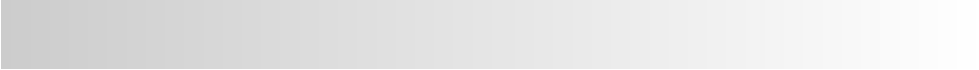
Another aspect of the key to success is to make a note of these dates and begin to build a dossier of articles and notes as promptly as possible

In short, the road to underachievement is to



One of the most daunting elements in the first few weeks at university is the bombardment of new language that students have to learn. Every subject has its own jargon and students are expected to learn the correct terminology. Again it is a simple matter of remaining steady and being patient until you are familiar with the terms. When you have heard, read, written and spoken them a number of times they will become part of your natural repertoire of knowledge. Once they have been assimilated into your thought processes, you will find that they come back to you when you need them – such as in a test, examination, assignment or group discussion. Therefore the terms that may initially instil fear will become the tools for self-confidence and precise expression. The real problem arises when too many words are introduced within a short time frame, and the best strategy here is to learn them selectively in stages.

Library staff at the university will provide a guided tour at the start of the new academic semester. Students should attend as many scheduled events as possible in the first few weeks to ensure that they become familiar with all available resources and services. If attendance is not possible then students should make up the lost ground as soon as possible so that they do not suffer the knock-on disadvantages. Each library will have its own unique features related to duration of book loans (short-term and long-term), rules, fines etc. In the introductory tour you will learn how to trace and locate books and journal articles, as well as how to use inter-library loans and how to recall books already out on loan.



let deadlines overtake you inadvertently so that you will not have the time, resources or knowledge-base to achieve the quality that you know you are capable of producing.

NEW WORDS, NEW TERMS, NEW JARGON

It would certainly be useful to make a list of all the new terms and then to tick them off as they are learnt. At a later stage it will do your self-confidence no harm to look back at the lists previously mastered. This strategy will both boost your confidence and whet your appetite to learn more.

Using the university library

THE GUIDED TOUR



Photocopying is another important procedure to learn in association with library use. Students may not be permitted to remove journals or key textbooks where there are a limited number available for a large class. Therefore, it is essential to learn the system for using the photocopiers and this will probably be demonstrated in the introductory tour.

In one class of third-year undergraduate students it was found in an informal survey that about half the students did not use the electronic facilities. This was a great shame and a real waste as these facilities allow students to access a wide variety of useful material and the little effort needed to master them will pay dividends. First and foremost, it is essential to learn how to use the university's electronic catalogue. These are designed to be user-friendly and are much less laborious than the old system of wading through large unwieldy catalogues. The computerised approach also means that records of stock can regularly be updated with ease and convenience. In the guided tour the library assistant will explain how to trace books and articles and how to place reservations on those books already on loan. Students will also learn how to find articles or books by authors' names and by keyword searches, and should ensure that they avail of any leaflets available that help to reinforce the lessons given in the guided tour.



Take a couple of friends and each of you go to separate locations within the library. Each take note of a few book titles, with authors and library reference numbers. Then rendezvous back at a library computer to exchange the information (except the library reference numbers). See if each can trace and then locate the books/articles suggested by the others. Motivation to do this exercise will be higher if you use a list of books and articles on your course and then divide the task equally between you. Try to practice this kind of use of the library on a regular basis. Allocation of tasks among friends and division of labour both enhances camaraderie and promotes efficient use of time.

One sound rule of thumb that should be applied to every new practice learnt at university is that students should go back and re-enact what they learned as soon as possible after learning it. Consolidation is one of the key elements in the road to success at university.

THE ELECTRONIC FACILITIES

Exercise – Library practice

It should be evident that knowing how to use the computerised library catalogue is indispensable. Moreover, the university will also provide electronic search bases that enable students to access either abstracts or full text facilities for journals. Some time and effort will be required in order to become familiar with these. Many students are daunted by the thought of using these and therefore never make the effort to master them. There will not be enough time in the initial tour to become thoroughly conversant with these facilities, but enquire if the university provides training seminars to familiarise students with their use. It should be a top priority of every student to book into one of these training sessions and then to make use of the facility as soon as possible afterwards. An additional advantage is the use of email, for the range of articles located in searches can be emailed to yourself and printed out later at a convenient time and place. Alternatively, articles can be saved on a floppy disk and later printed out from a PC. Remember that library assistants are there to help you and you must learn not to be shy about asking for assistance.



It may be the case that in the first year of an undergraduate programme, the use of periodicals or journals is not an essential requirement. Some modules at this stage may be based primarily on standard textbooks. Students, therefore, may not have the motivation to use the electronic facilities for searching out these kinds of articles. Consequently when the time comes to use them, many are impeded in their progress. It's a good idea to get some practice with friends on the use of the electronic search bases from the outset of the course. A small circle of student friends can each find a topic of interest and try to trace aspects of this through the electronic services provided. This task will be more rewarding if a) the topic has been reasonably well-researched and there are substantial numbers of articles available on it or b) the topic is in some way related to your course so that you may be able to make use of what you find at a later stage and c) you set aside a regular period every week or so to engage in this practice so that what you learn does not lapse and d) you keep a folder to accumulate all the collected material. You can try to trace the subject matter through authors' names, keywords or particular journals that are likely to contain the topic. A good starting point would be to check the reference section in a fairly up-to-date textbook on your chosen subject.

It is important to build a good rapport with library staff and this involves some simple courtesies such as patience when they are busy, gratitude when they are helpful and apologies when you interrupt or inadvertently waste their time. A genuine and friendly smile and a teachable spirit will not do the cause of being helped one iota of harm!

Exercise – Operation regularity

The quality of university libraries would be enhanced if all students complied with some basic ethical standards. It was previously stressed that library staff should be treated with courtesy and consideration and the same principles should be applied in other library situations. For example, some students appear to use the library as a centre for socialising in an environment where noise is distracting and ‘silence is golden’. Most students will respond positively to a courteous request for silence but, if not, then you have a right to ask a library assistant for help.

A large problem in libraries is books not being returned to their proper place after being used within the library. This is most frustrating for other students who desperately need the books, and time consuming for library assistants who have to relocate them. It is not unknown for students to conceal a book deliberately or tear out a journal article so that they can have competitive advantage over others. However, a little reflection will show that such a reprehensible practice is soon obvious – other students complain that the book or article cannot be traced and yet one student has it referenced in their assignment. In general it is much wiser to be helpful to other students, and some of them will return the compliment.

Younger students are sometimes less confident than mature students because they have less experience of life and may not feel they have the social skills that would serve them well in interacting with others at university. One younger student observed that she felt intimidated by the mature students in her class who appeared to be confident and authoritative in their contributions to class discussions. In one sense this kind of confidence can only come with time, patience and practice and there is no short cut to it. On the other hand it may help to know that mature students often feel a little inferior to younger students because they reached university earlier and may be perceived as ‘whiz kids’. The mature students may feel a little deficient in ability because they may not have had sufficient qualifications for university entrance after leaving school. Problems for younger students are often compounded by:



SOME ETHICAL ISSUES

Particular problems

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS



Being severed from home and family ties, perhaps for the first time.

Being in a new environment where they may not know anyone initially.

Suddenly having the responsibility for managing a budget for the first time.

Being secluded in a campus (perhaps outside town).

Four simple pieces of sound advice are:

Try to make new friends as soon as possible and share your problems together.

As soon as you see problems beginning to mount, contact student support services for advice and direction.

Try to find an interest or hobby that you can pursue at university (all the better if you can attach yourself to some sports club etc. within the university).

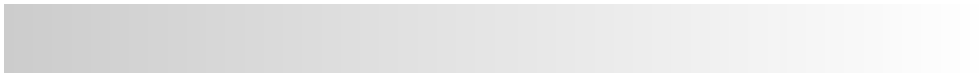
Never leave any problems until they are out of control.

The greatest problem for many mature students is trying to juggle a range of responsibilities (home, family, work, lectures) in order to accommodate regular study time. Such students are likely to be highly motivated and will already have developed coping strategies. The first piece of advice for mature students is simply to use the skills they have already acquired in relation to social interaction, time management etc. However there will be new insights in this book that will encourage mature students to develop their potential further. For many mature students sacrifices have to be made to go to university or college, so their eagerness to learn and achieve needs to be channelled into discrete strategies. Primary advice therefore is to develop sound strategies as early as possible in the course and to use whatever support services are available rather than let problems snowball out of control. The guidelines given throughout the book are meant for all students, but mature students may benefit especially from the sections on good time-management, selective reading, economic writing and good exam strategies. Mature students may not have as much recent experience in tests as



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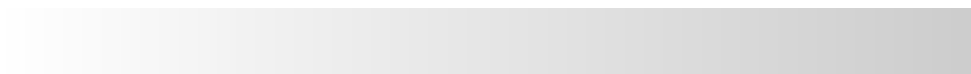
FOR MATURE STUDENTS



younger students and therefore may derive benefit from close attention to Chapter 9, 'Doing justice to yourself in exams'.

A range of disabilities/special needs is represented in contemporary universities, and the universities are required to demonstrate that they have made adequate provision for such students. However, the university cannot help students if they do not know about their particular needs. First, students with special needs should make themselves known to their course director, studies advisor or year tutor and ask if any processes have been put in place to deal with their particular problems. Second, these students should ask what support services and information services are available to assist them. Some students require special provision for access to essential parts of the university such as the library, computer labs etc., and some may need to sit near the front of a lecture theatre. Others may need special provision for sitting tests or examinations and the sooner these needs are made known, the better it will be for the student. Not all disabilities are clearly evident and therefore students can suffer in silence, bottle up their anxieties and disadvantage themselves in their academic performance. If students make their needs known at an early stage then adequate provision can be made in good time and they can be made aware of any support groups or special needs groups that exist, or at least have their attention drawn to the fact that such groups might be started.

Students who take the trouble to uproot in order to study in a foreign land are likely to invest a huge effort in accomplishing their goals. Very often these students set examples to local students by their singular determination and concerted efforts toward excellence. Many foreign students will have friends already engaged in a course at the university of their choice. This is a great advantage for it is a good point of contact and provides the best possible introduction. In some courses there may be a tutor who is the contact person for foreign students and will guide them toward a comfortable initiation and adjustment into the university system. If you are coming to a university where you have no established friends, you should enquire if there is a tutor or person you can liaise with in order to make a smooth transition into university life. It will help if you can meet with friends of the same or similar ethnicity.



STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

FOREIGN STUDENTS



Moreover, it will be beneficial if you can, through time, widen your contacts and circle of friends, but allow yourself time to get accustomed to the new environment. Write to the university for any useful guidelines for foreign students, and it will also help if you can talk to someone who completed a course in the university (or at least country) that you are planning to move to. They will be familiar with all the problems you are likely to face and the best ways to negotiate them.

If you plan to come to an English-speaking university, and feel that your English needs improvement, you may find that the university provides a course on 'English for foreign students', or else they will be aware of the nearest available course. It is always easier to learn a foreign language when you are in the environment where it is spoken. Foreign students frequently become quite fluent in English after a short period in the university environment. First year at university is designed so that students can learn all the requisite skills for achieving a good degree. Therefore be patient with yourself for the first year and work at developing your English (if necessary) in parallel with the other knowledge you need to acquire.

Each university will have its own range of support services and there is likely to be full-time and part-time staff available to help you with your enquiries. It is not an inconvenience for them when you go and knock on their door and ask for help. Universities should have a range of advisors including welfare officer, solicitor, chaplain, counsellor, financial advisor and crèche service etc. If you knock on the wrong door for help then you will be referred to the right contact person. Ask for leaflets that give information about the range of support services available. Central points for leaflets are the library and the Students' Union. Find out where the Students' Union area is and take a look at the names on the doors and the services they represent. You do not know when you may suddenly need these services. Remember that problems should be nipped in the bud before they get out of control.

In addition to these services, each School or Department within the university may have its own particular provisions. Each course will have its own co-ordinator and there should be a tutor assigned to take overall responsibility for each level. Moreover, each student should be allocated a studies advisor and it may be the student's responsibility to go and introduce themselves to their advisor. Many students are afraid of

SUPPORT SERVICES

being perceived as a nuisance, but you can share your problems in a manner that does not wear the listener down whilst getting some good advice that will help you bring them under control.

Many students suffer anxiety to a greater or lesser extent at one time or another at university or college. Anxiety can be an unpleasant state that is triggered by circumstances unrelated to the academic course, but the pervasive and recurrent activator for anxiety is more likely to be related to academic pressures. It is claimed that anxiety is more likely to kick in in situations where some performance is going to be evaluated, where the person entertains doubts about their own ability to complete the task successfully and where the consequences of failure are likely to be serious (Liebert & Morris, 1967; Deffenbacher, 1980; El-Zahhar & Hocevar, 1991). The good news is that anxiety can be brought under control, and it has been found that when anxiety is reduced, performance is likely to improve (Hembree, 1988). Chapter 9 is about developing strategies to maximise performance in tests or exams. This includes coping mechanisms for keeping anxiety under control and strategies that may help turn stress into advantage. Of course anxiety is not confined to testing situations but the strategies advocated will be adaptive for all anxiety-generating situations.

In the book *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, 1622–88) the Christian traveller is confronted with two lions in his path. From a distance he wondered if he could get past them, but as his courage brought him nearer to them he noticed that each was tied to a post at opposite sides of the road. There was a gap in the middle of the path where he could safely pass through. The moral of the story is that when we confront problems head on, they are often not as debilitating as we previously envisaged, and usually there is some way through. John Bunyan also penned these words about the pilgrim: 'No lion can him fright, he'll with a giant fight, he will make good his right, to be a pilgrim.' The stress that you feel about a task that seems threatening may be converted into energy that can be used to face the challenge. Things are often not what they seem,



FLASHPOINTS FOR ANXIETY

Ten reinforcements for a positive mindset

THREATS CAN BE INTERPRETED AS CHALLENGES



and things that first appear to be stumbling blocks can become the stepping stones to great progress. For example, many students begin their course with a fear of statistics or computing and end up achieving a good standard in these disciplines.

In one experiment Zajonc (1968) found that people came to like what they were familiar with, even though the focus of familiarity was nothing more than nonsense syllables! Many people would feel overwhelmed in a world where little was familiar or predictable. For many it appears that feelings of security only coexist with familiar surrounds and familiar people. Although that is likely to be true for many people, the simple fact is that the secure feeling of familiarity can be gradually extended to a range of diverse contexts. At first the university may seem almost a hostile environment because there are so many new features to address, but after a short time these will become part of your normal world.



Through time and experience students 'habituate' to many aspects of university that initially appeared threatening. A lecturer once gave an example of what is meant by habituation – when a snail comes out of its shell and is gently touched by an object such as a pen, it rapidly recoils into the security of the shell. Next time this happens it will recoil again, but every time the touch is repeated the snail will recoil more slowly and emerge more quickly. If the action is repeated enough times the snail will only recoil a little and eventually will not recoil at all. In effect the snail learns that the stimulus is not a threat, and therefore habituates to its influence. So it is with accumulated experience at university – students learn that if they work steadily, their fear of failure diminishes, and the influences around them are found to be more benign than they had imagined.

When students look at any task they have to perform under evaluative conditions, they can choose whether to perceive it primarily as a threat or a challenge – like the two men who looked out through prison bars – one saw mud and the other stars.

NEW STUDENTS SOON HABITUATE AT COLLEGE

Habituation

One student said that he never wanted to leave university for he had come to enjoy the student life so much! A substantial aspect of university life is non-academic. There are coffee breaks, lunch breaks, periods between lectures, social events, sports activities etc. There are many opportunities to develop new friendships and meet interesting people from a variety of backgrounds. Even when the pressure is on, it is 'therapeutic' to be with people who have to face the same demands and deadlines. Students can share their problems and provide a primary source of support for each other.

University would be a morbid place if all students did was to lament their plight to one another. The Readers' Digest has a section entitled, 'Laughter: the best medicine'. In laughter our minds are pulled away from preoccupation with seemingly intractable problems. When we return to them, as we must, we often find that our thinking is clearer and more balanced. Children love funny characters who can make them laugh, and adults are often no different. Fun and humour are like valves that release pressure and diffuse tension. Ensure, therefore, that you find ways to laugh, have fun and enjoy relaxation. University should be remembered as a place where there were many harmless fun times and pleasurable occasions.

When students involve themselves in fun activities and work at making good supportive friendships at university, these will help to shape within them a good positive perception of their academic institution. However, there is no good reason why this perception cannot be extended to include academic endeavours. The first thing to do is to plan out your study schedules well. Make out a plan that will cover the typical week – that should include lectures, seminars, labs, tutorials and all that is part of the weekly programme. Within the time frames that remain you should plan your personal study periods at home and in the library. Keep a diary for this purpose and don't give up the practice because some unexpected events arise at times to disrupt set plans. Ensure that you always schedule into your weekly programme times for relaxation, fun and socialising – these are 'the sanity factor!' By doing this kind of planning you will give yourself a good feeling of being in control of what is going on in your life, while at the same time being flexible enough to allow for any changes that arise.