Managing your studies

Tips to help you prepare for higher education study

A consequence of being an independent learner is that you will have to take more responsibility for organising your studies: what and how you study is individual to every student, so no-one can organise that for you. For instance, you may find that you are timetabled for lab work or lectures every day from 9.00-17.00, and still have to find time for writing up lab reports and completing maths worksheets. Or you may have only a few hours of contact teaching a week, but be expected to do a lot of independent study that you have to organise yourself.

You will probably be used to making timetables and work schedules, and perhaps even setting up a filing system. As being organised will become much more important, it's a good time to check out the ideas in this section to see how managing your workload will be different, and if you could do these things even more effectively.

To manage your higher education studies effectively, you need to know about:

- Planning your time
- Getting organised
- Making the most of the time you have

Planning your time

You will be expected to make sure you have up-to-date information about your academic commitments, and have made sure that you can keep them. That includes lectures, seminars and other teaching sessions, meetings with tutors and assignment deadlines. It's a lot to organise, but if you get on top of it early, you'll have plenty of time for work and play.

Use your mobile, computer etc... You're probably used to making paper timetables and using a diary or wall planner, but e-tools like calendars on mobile phones and Google, or programs like Microsoft Outlook can also help in more interactive ways. You can set them to remind you of upcoming deadlines, or add links to resources, maps and contact details, for instance. They're also highly portable - though diaries and wall planners do have the advantage of not running out of battery power!

Spread your workload... It is very likely that you will find lots of deadlines for assignments all happening at the same time (usually the end of term). You will be expected to manage this workload yourself - no-one will accept it as an excuse if you don't get them all done. So decide on your own deadlines for starting and finishing work on your assignments, and spread the load.

Decide when you're going to study... You will be expected to build in time for your own independent study. It's easy to keep putting this off - which means that you spend a lot of time feeling guilty about not working, and not enough on getting the job done properly. Make a study timetable and decide when you are going to do reading, seminar preparation or work on assignments. Then you can enjoy your free time without feeling as if you should be working!

Prioritise your tasks... Everyone does the things that they enjoy first - but the other things may be the ones that get you more credits, or need more time to complete well. Consider the best way to prioritise...
tasks to get everything done and achieve the greatest success. If you find you're persistently putting off starting a piece of work, talk to someone who can help.

**Set achievable targets...** It can be hard to keep yourself motivated, so set goals to work towards. It's better to have lots of small, achievable goals ("finish reading this chapter", "write my introduction", "check my references") than big ones ("write my report") that take a long time to achieve and are difficult to pace.

**Getting organised**

Organised students are happy students, because they are the ones who have the extra time to spend chatting, playing or relaxing, while the disorganised ones are still searching for that one important piece of paper they need. You will have a lot to keep track of when you’re studying in higher education, and you will be expected to work out a way of doing it for yourself. Set up some simple systems early and give yourself lots of extra free time.

**Keep yourself informed...** There will be essential information you will need for your studies: for instance, when and where your classes are. All universities provide information online now, usually general information through extensive websites and information that’s more specific to you through Virtual Learning Environments (Blackboard, for instance). Before you start your course is a really good time to explore your university's website and see what information is available and where to find it.

**Have simple filing systems...** Box files are an easier option than ring folders for storing paper materials - have one for each module and one for general admin. If you need to carry notes around, use a document folder and empty it once a week. Set up folders for your computer files too, including your emails - avoids the dreaded full inbox and makes important information easier to find.

**Set up a study space...** If at all possible, it’s good to establish a working space where everything you need is close at hand. If you have to use a temporary space, keep all your work essential together in something like a plastic crate, so you can quickly set up a working space.

**Get e-organised...** It’s also a good idea to separate your study and leisure activities online when you need to avoid being distracted - better not to write your essay with Facebook open, for instance! You will probably be able to ‘bounce’ your official university email to your personal email so that you can check all your emails in one place, but you might consider keeping them separate so you can focus on study in study time.

**Making the most of the time you have**

Planning how you use your time is going to be vital in your higher education studies, but using that time efficiently can give you an extra edge. Everyone has different ways of studying that suit them. You will be expected to consider what works for you, and what you need to develop to make it work better.

**Get ‘study-fit’...** Just as if you were embarking on a fitness regime, now’s a good time to consider your strengths and weaknesses in study practices. Do you need to improve your punctuation? Learn about referencing? Find a way to focus on study and avoid distractions? Decide what you need to work on.

**Use your best times of day...** Everyone has a time of day when they find it easier to concentrate; don’t waste this time when you could be doing your most productive studying. For instance, you might be better first thing in the morning, but think that you ought to tidy your room before you start studying. By the time you start, your concentration is poorer and it takes longer to understand what you’re reading. So save the tidying for your poor concentration time, and make the most of the good time.
**Spend time to save time...** Making essay plans and writing drafts might feel like using more time. Actually it will save you time in the long term, and make for a better assignment. Having a plan keeps you on track, so you don’t waste time wondering what to write next, or going off-topic. Writing drafts gets your ideas down fluently, without having to constantly stop to check and make it perfect.

**Give yourself a break!...** No-one does well if they try to study 24/7. For a start, your brain needs time to process the information that you’re feeding into it, or it will struggle to make sense of it later. But you also need to stay fit, sleep well and have a social life; you may have other commitments that you need to fit in, like family or paid work.