

Starting university

A guide for new students

Welcome to Plymouth University

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For further information and the full range of study guides go to:

<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn>

Welcome to Plymouth University!

Congratulations - you are on a Plymouth University programme! Like many other students, you may be feeling a little apprehensive about studying in higher education. Perhaps you have concerns about your ability to study at this level, or you may have been away from education for some time and feel that you are out of practice. Don't panic! These feelings are quite natural and can be overcome with time, practice, motivation and support.

Common concerns

Many students feel anxious when they first start university and may experience culture shock, perhaps due to leaving a familiar environment. It can result in a mixture of feelings and emotions such as reduced confidence or homesickness. However, as an individual with unique life experiences, you have many resources to draw upon to help you through the challenging times. Although you are expected to be more autonomous in Higher Education (HE), this does not mean that you are alone. Other students, lecturers and personal tutors, advisors and counsellors as well as family and friends can offer support. Refer to your Student Handbook, the prospectus or website for useful contact names and numbers.

Reflecting upon your reasons for attending university may help boost enthusiasm during difficult times. In any case, think about what it means to be a student in general, and what it means to be a student of your particular discipline, on your particular course.

Skills development

You are probably here because you want to learn about your subject, but there is much more to it: as well as the broader life skills, you will learn the 'academic literacy' of your subject: that is, the communication and other skills associated with your field.

Perhaps one of the best things about studying in HE is the opportunity to hone your thinking skills. As well as taking in material in your lectures, reading and other work, you are expected to engage with other's work critically. The centre of academic culture is to do with testing and furthering knowledge, and you are part of this culture. As you progress through your degree, developing your skills for critical thinking and use of literature to explore and rationalise your knowledge of your subject will become increasingly important. Refer to our range of study guides for help, and particularly 'Study Guide 8: Critical Thinking'. For help with referencing, use Pears and Shields' *Cite them right*.

You will be increasingly expected to take responsibility for your own learning; your success depends on your knowing how to make the most of the learning opportunities provided and make the most of the resources and support available. Getting a degree does not just depend on how much you know, or how much work you do, but also on how well you communicate and *apply* your knowledge and understanding. So it is really helpful to develop self-awareness in relation to your personal, professional and academic strengths and weaknesses in order to work on them.

Learning styles

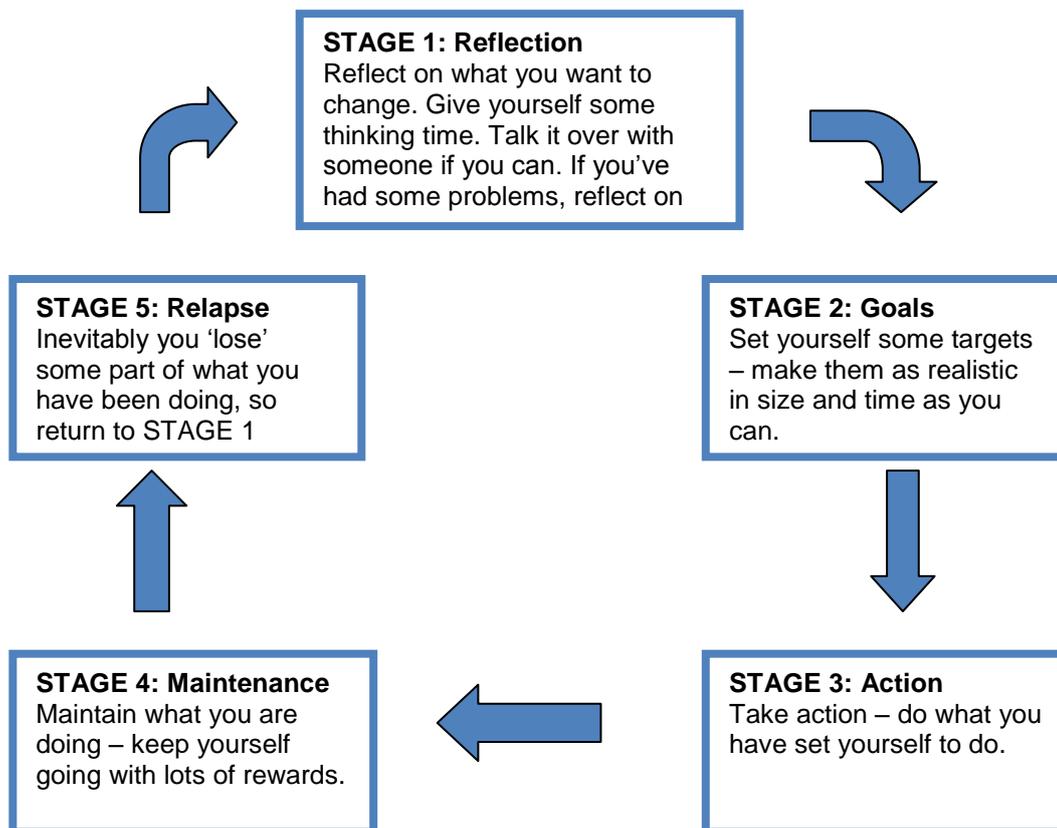
It is worthwhile spending some time thinking about how you learn best. There are numerous learning strategies and everyone has their own learning styles. There are a number of free online questionnaires available to help you identify your learning style: search under 'learning style' or 'learning style inventory'. A particularly useful site is <http://www.vark-learn.com/>.

Deep and surface learning

Learning can be undertaken in a passive (surface) or active (deep) way. A passive approach to learning limits what you learn and how you learn it. This approach involves reducing what is to be learnt to the status of unconnected facts to be memorised and recalled during the assessment process. In contrast, a deep approach involves making decisions about what is to be learned and making sense of it, looking for connections and relationships between ideas, and understanding concepts and principles.

Figure 1 is a model (after Kolb, 1984) to help you adopt an active rather than passive approach to learning. This process can be used when approaching all your study: for instance, doing specific coursework; establishing which revision methods to use; reflecting on how best to look after your physical or emotional wellbeing.

Figure 1: Active learning cycle



Reflection

As a way of monitoring your progress, try recording your experiences of learning in a diary, log or journal. Include your main concerns, how you wrestle with them and any understandings that emerge. Think about the approaches that work, and those that don't. In this way you will concentrate on the process of your learning. Some educational practitioners believe that reflection is a fundamental part of learning, and it is particularly important in becoming an independent learner. See our study guide on reflection' for further guidance.

Feedback

Feedback is an extremely useful way of finding out how you are doing and what you need to do to improve. Make the most of the advice and feedback you receive from lecturers, tutors, fellow students, family and friends; accept that you are human and that you will inevitably make mistakes. Try not to receive feedback as criticism or interpret it as failure, but be open to working with it. There is always room for improvement.

Work/life balance

Working whilst doing your degree invariably places extra demands on your time and energy. It is important to think about your routine and how much time you allow for study. If you are a full-time student, you should allow at least 40 hours per week for degree-related work; spending less time studying may increase your stress levels and mean that you do not achieve your full potential.

Think positively about employment. Regard the time spent at work as an opportunity to develop skills that will be complementary to your academic activities. View your current study and work activities as useful preparation and practice for your future.

Breaks and holidays are a valuable part of your time spent at university – it can't be all work and no play! It is important to take time away from your studies and use vacation time wisely. Think about doing something that you could not do during term time: earn some money or gain some valuable experience; do something useful to put in your CV if possible. Use the time to look at your study habits: make resolutions, think about areas of your skills development which could be improved and plan time to focus on these.

References

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Recommended reading

Cottrell, S. (2008) *The study skills handbook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Northedge, A. (2007) *The good study guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2008) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Pear Tree Books.

Race, P. (2007) *How to get a good degree: making the most of your time at university*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Learning Development
www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn
learn@plymouth.ac.uk
Learning Gateway, RLB 011
01752 587676

Tutorials
Drop-in Zone
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