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# 1 Introduction

## ► Your degree

This is a book about choices; not just the obvious choices you already know that you will have to make at university (which courses to take, which books to read) but also those choices that you may not yet have thought about (which lectures to attend, which career to choose). This is not a conventional study guide; there are many useful books available that will help you to write an essay, study a work of literature or present at a seminar. What this book is all about is the management of your degree, the ways in which you can make sure that you have the best time possible and achieve the right result by the end of your course. The book does not, for example, teach you how to skim read a reference book, but it will tell you how to choose which reference books to read and which to discard. It does not aim to teach you how to write an essay, but it will show you how to plan your time so that you can get the essay in by the due date without having a nervous breakdown in the process. The book also helps with those areas of student life that are not covered in traditional study skills guides, such as how to make your money last to the end of your course, how to cope with peer pressure and how to make the most of your tutors.

There was a time when being an undergraduate was essentially a passive experience. You were presented with a fairly rigid course structure and you worked your way through it until you reached your final examinations, which you hoped to pass. In this way it did not feel that different from pre-university studying. Students have always had to produce essays, contribute to seminars and pass examinations, but now they are increasingly proactive about the experience of being an undergraduate, often having to choose between competing modules, giving professional-level presentations and working under a variety of assessment conditions. They also have to juggle the demands of their studying, a social life and the financial constraints placed upon them. You are in what might be called an 'asymmetrical bargaining position'. You want to be at university, many courses are oversubscribed and you are probably aware that another student would have taken your place had you not taken it up. You have competed to get here and

have succeeded, so you will probably feel relieved to be on your course, at your university. On the other hand, whilst universities are centres of excellence for research, they are also teaching institutions that must meet the needs of their students. You can feel confident that you have a right to be here, just as your university has a right to expect that you will undertake the task before you with a level of commitment and (they hope) enthusiasm.

This may seem like a fairly straightforward bargain: you work well, the university gives you a degree and everyone is happy. What makes the bargain asymmetrical, especially in its early stages, is that they do not know everything about you and you will not know everything about them. Your department can be fairly certain that it has made the right choice. They know about your academic achievements and have references about you. However, what they may not know, for example, is that, although you write very well, you are anxious about speaking out in a seminar, or that although you can get through reading lists, you take forever to plough through each book. Perhaps you have to work for cash whilst you study or maybe your parents are moving abroad, making access to a library in the vacations problematic. These are the sort of things that they will need to learn about you. What you may not know about are all the aspects of university life that did not feature in your decision-making process when you made your choices about where to study. It may be, for example, that you assumed that assessment would be primarily through examinations, but your chosen courses are assessed exclusively by coursework, which you find difficult, or perhaps you are having more trouble than you anticipated finding accommodation near the university. Life as an undergraduate is, in this way, a continuing form of negotiation. You will work well, but only when you know what is expected of you and feel in control of the process. The university staff will support you, but can only do this if they know about problems as they arise. This book will help you to negotiate effectively as your degree course progresses. University life is not about 'you' and 'them'; your department will do its utmost to help you, and you can help yourself, and them, by getting to grips with the issues raised in this book. Hurdles can be overcome, your time can be managed effectively, your achievement level can rise. All this, and more, is possible for every student.

The advice offered within this book is inevitably generalised, offered to help you to negotiate all the differing aspects of your degree. Its aim is to share with you all the facets of university life, but one word of warning is necessary: your department is the best place to go in order to get the definitive facts about your life at university. This book will reveal to you the ways in which you can move forward and maximise your potential and the help that is available to you if things go wrong, but you will still need to check with your personal tutor, departmental handbook or subject secretary about

specific points and your own university's regulations. You may never have any contact with the regulatory bodies within your university, but these exist in order to enforce the regulations of the university, adjudicate on problem situations and listen to appeals about results and disciplinary action. Make a point of at least getting to grips with the rudimentary points of your university's regulations: they are usually clearly explained within the available literature and there will be a system in place to cover almost every eventuality.

### ► **The structure of your degree programme**

Perhaps the most significant change in higher education in recent years is the way in which degrees have become largely modular in structure. As a result, students enjoy a more flexible degree package and want to get the best possible result in a degree that may link more directly to their career choice than in the past. Modular degrees are the ideal way to ensure that students study and enjoy those courses that really interest them and allow them to study not just their core subjects, but also peripheral subjects that will give them pleasure and in which they can succeed. The downside to modular degrees is that they can be a bit confusing, and you might feel that one wrong move could wreck your degree. You can also be left feeling that there is too much choice, that you want to do it all. There is no need to worry; as well as reading this book, you will get support from your department as to how to make the right modular choices, whether you choose on the basis of interest alone, to suit your timetable or fit in with your preference for certain modes of assessment.

Whatever choices you make about the exact profile of your degree, your course of study will cost you a good deal of time, money and effort, and you will want to get it right. Anxiety is one of the greatest inhibitors of performance. If you are worried about what is expected of you, feel pressurised by a peer group which is not helping you or constantly concerned about how you are going to survive financially, you will not work effectively. There are as many different students at university, from as many different backgrounds and cultures, as there are individuals in any other area of life. You will see undergraduates around you who seem to shine in every task, are involved in several university societies and always seem to be able to produce answers in seminars with confidence and apparently no effort. You will also see, if you look a little more closely, students who are bewildered, struggling to keep up or experiencing problems in specific areas of student life. Whichever type of student you are, this book can be of use to you. What you do not want for yourself is to be going home at the end

of your first term feeling exhausted, with no cash left and no clear idea as to whether you are getting it right or wrong. This could leave you questioning whether you should even be at university, when in reality you are doing no worse than most of your fellow undergraduates. The first aim of this guide is to help you to cope with the initial stages of life as an undergraduate.

For many students, the first two terms at university will differ radically from the rest of their course. You may find that this time is spent covering the fundamentals of your subject or subjects, particularly if you are taking a degree in more than one subject. However, for most students, these terms give them an opportunity to study subjects outside their core courses, perhaps very different subjects from those that they will be studying for the rest of their time at university. The first stage of your degree may see you tackling a subject that you will never study again and this is an exciting prospect. You will also be creating a social life and perhaps finding a part-time job. Chapter 4 will tell you how to make the most of the first six weeks of your life at university, whilst Chapter 5 will help you to decide between the options that are open to you. Being able to choose from a variety of courses as your degree progresses is a key feature of your undergraduate experience, but there are two things to bear in mind as you read this book and make those choices. Firstly, you do not need to have a firm plan in mind when you enter university. You have probably chosen a course because of the modules that it offers, but make sure that you remain open to new possibilities as they arise. No guide to a department can include every possible choice that might be made available to students, so reconsidering your degree profile regularly is vital if you are to make the most of your time.

The second point to bear in mind is that it is rarely too late to change your mind. Of course, if you are already halfway through a two-term module when you decide that you hate it, it is probably not possible (or worth your while) for you to change. The advice offered in this book will help you to understand what has gone wrong and will point you in the right direction so that the course becomes bearable. However, many students feel trapped when they have no need to feel this way. You might choose a module in all good faith, believing that it will suit your needs, be of interest to you and in which you can succeed. You begin the module and decide that it is wrong for you, perhaps because you misunderstood the information given to you, or because the course or method of assessment has changed. There are a multitude of reasons why you might decide that a module (or even, as can sometimes happen, your whole degree) is wrong for you, and this book will help you to focus your thinking, decide what to do and then make the necessary changes with the support of your department and tutor.

## ► The wider aspects of your degree course

Humanities and Social Science degrees are rewarding because they are not designed exclusively to get you into a job and keep you there. If you are taking a highly specialised or vocational degree, you may well know what career you are aiming for even before you get to university, but for most Humanities and Social Science undergraduates university is an adventure in itself; ideas about a career will be in your thoughts, but not completely fixed. This gives you the advantage of knowing that you can develop your career ideas as your course progresses, aware that your degree will be of help to you in many areas of work. It is perhaps with this in mind that Humanities and Social Science degree programmes tend to be very wide in scope and flexible in approach. You might go to university to study Politics and find yourself doing some work within the Law department, or you might take a degree in French but decide to include a module from the Italian department.

Universities work hard to help you to maximise your skills base. Of course you are here to study your core subject or subjects, but the aim of a degree is to prepare you for life, to train your mind to work effectively in situations that are entirely unrelated to your degree. It will sometimes be difficult, when you are dashing to keep up with your course, to appreciate that you are acquiring new skills, but there is no doubt that this is exactly what will be happening. Whatever your subject, you will be learning to manage your time, read critically, analyse opinions and information that are being presented to you, form an argument logically, communicate it effectively and present your thoughts articulately. You will also be familiarising yourself with the logistics of team building, acquiring leadership qualities and learning the techniques of presentation that are so important to employers. These things do not happen by chance: universities deliberately organise the workload of students so as to allow these qualities to develop and you will have ample opportunity to work at these skills and find ways to demonstrate them. If you are unclear about what is expected of you or unhappy with your course or your performance, you will find that your route to mastering these skills is hampered. It is the task of this book to clear the way for you, to allow you to achieve your full potential in the time that you have at university.

The formal structure of your degree, the courses that you take, are only the starting point of the experiences that you will have at university. Some of the other features of taking a degree may not yet have occurred to you. You might, for example, be expected to give a formal, professional-level presentation, or work on your own, supported by your tutor, on a piece of research. You might be working to earn some money as you study, or become involved in a student society. You are increasingly likely to be required to undertake a module of career research and assessment and your department,

school or faculty may offer a range of further opportunities, from work placements to time spent studying abroad. All these options are discussed in this book and they all represent vitally important aspects of your undergraduate experience. This guide is designed to remove the unnecessary pressures of uncertainty and confusion, so that you can begin your degree in a positive frame of mind and continue to work effectively, without burdening yourself unnecessarily, leaving you time to explore and make the most of every opportunity.

### ► **How to use this book**

So you have to make choices, decisions that will affect your time at university, perhaps fundamentally. Universities expect a higher level of sophistication from their students than ever before, yet you might not always feel equipped to make these choices. That is why this book exists: to help you to maximise your potential during your degree and help when things feel as if they are getting out of hand. Things can seem to be disastrous when you start to believe that you are losing control of your time and your studying: the reading list is just too long, essay submission dates clash or you feel that you have missed a whole chunk of learning that everyone else seems completely confident about. That is when you need to sit back, take stock and decide how to handle the situation.

University life can seem very strange, particularly at the beginning, and miles away from your experience as a pre-university student. If you are a mature student, who has completed an access course or come to university straight from a career, life as an undergraduate can be even more disorientating. By reading this book you will get a feel for what is expected of you and what you can expect from your university. Although many university departments make great efforts to familiarise their students with the ways in which they will be studying, it can sometimes feel as if there is something missing, a secret that you need to discover before you can truly settle into your new life. What your department demands of you is obvious to the university; it may be far less clear to you, despite the handbooks and guides that are produced by the university. If you are to make the most of your time at university, you will need to familiarise yourself with the system as soon as possible. Spending hours (perhaps days) worrying about a reading list, how assessment works or how you are going to get enough cash to survive is time wasted. Reading this book is a far easier (and less painful) way of ensuring that you quickly become a confident, and therefore successful, undergraduate.

The skills that this book will help you to master will be relevant through-

out your course. As you read through the book, you will find that it will support you during the whole of your time as an undergraduate. From getting started and making the right choices in the first six weeks or so of university, it then tackles the issue of further options later in your course. All the practicalities of your studying are covered, including reading lists, means of assessment, lectures, tutorials and seminars. Chapter 6 deals with life beyond studying, including how to survive financially, how to network and use peer pressure to your advantage and where to go to make the most of university social life. Chapter 7 is devoted to how you can cope if things begin to go wrong for you, offering you clear, practical guidance on how to make things right again. The final chapter takes you beyond your degree by helping you with the challenge of getting a job when you leave university.

Your life as an undergraduate is not going to be beset by problems. This is not an academic obstacle course, laden with impossible hurdles that have been deliberately placed in your way. For much of your time at university you will sail along, feeling confident about your work and enjoying what you are doing. The secret to success is eliminating problems before they arise. As you work through each chapter of this book, you will be getting ahead of the game. Even before you are faced with an assessed essay, you will feel confident about how to approach it. If you are confused by a lecture, you will know how to deal with it. If you are expected to give a presentation, you will not be daunted by the prospect. You will also be able to keep in mind that there is a life after university and you will be preparing for this. This guide will offer you reassurance, not just about the practicalities of taking a degree, but about your own experience of life at university. You may find yourself, on occasion, feeling muddled about what you are doing, or confused by concepts or theories, but knowing that everyone else feels this way at times, realising that your feelings of insecurity (as well as your elation at successes) are entirely normal, can be a big help. This book aims to assure you that your reaction to this new life is quite normal and that difficulties, should they arise, are both common and often relatively easy to overcome.

By the time you are well into your studying you may not have the time, or perhaps the inclination, to reread whole chapters of this book, but it might be useful to check that you are still on the right lines, or remind yourself of how best to approach a new situation. It is for this reason that each chapter closes with a 'spot guide'. The spot guide gives you each key point of the chapter in one sentence, allowing you to confirm to yourself that you are clear about what you are doing, or prompting you to reread a section of the chapter in order to get to grips with a situation in more detail. After your initial reading, you may have to go back to only one or two chapters in detail, but by checking the spot guide you will have the benefit of knowing that you have mastered all the management aspects of each chapter. Towards the

end of your degree, your experience will have been reflected in each chapter of the book and you will be ready to work with the guidance in the final chapter as you move into your chosen career.

When stressed out students are asked what is wrong with them, they often give the vaguest of answers. They think that they might be homesick, university is not living up to their expectations or they are not clever enough, quick enough or sussed enough to cope with university life. It is easy for those who are trying to help to see them as inarticulate, unable to be helped effectively because what is wrong seems so intangible. Yet very often the problem is not that the students are being unhelpful, or refusing to help themselves, but that they really do not know what is making them unhappy, or preventing them from getting the grades that are expected of them. Usually they are confused and demoralised precisely because they cannot put a finger on what is going awry. If you find yourself thinking that there is just too much work being piled onto you, you need to discover why you feel like this. It is possible, of course, that there really is too much work being handed out to you in one term (it happens), but it is more likely that you are not successfully managing your time as an undergraduate, perhaps because you are working to earn money at the same time, you have made what are the wrong course choices for you or you are unclear about what is expected of you.

Undergraduates are not naturally vague, nor are they lazy, but they do need to be clear about what is going on. You will find that each chapter of this book opens with a troubleshooting guide that is designed to help you if you feel that things are running out of control. By checking the troubleshooting guide, you will be able to identify the problem that is at the root of your troubles and you will find help within the chapter to guide you through that aspect of your degree. It may not solve all your problems, but identifying the source of your difficulty will take you halfway towards solving it, and there are plenty of pointers in each chapter as to where to go next to get help. You will find that, in most cases, your problem will be solved simply by understanding what is going on. Once you know the difference between a seminar paper and a seminar presentation, for example, you will understand what is expected of you in each circumstance. If you are clear about how to use reading lists, you will relax and benefit from what they have to offer. Once your options become clear to you, you will get on with the task of making the most of them.

The pressure is on students like never before. You will probably have come to university via a system that required you to perform well in SATs, GCSEs, A and AS levels or within another pre-university course. You have had to be focused on passing examinations, getting the grades and working exactly as you are expected to do in order to achieve. This may have resulted in the best ever pass rates at all levels, but it has left students to face life as under-

graduates with a preconception that nothing else matters but passing each module and excelling in each examination. These things are important, of course, but other areas of university life are important also. In recent years more and more students ask me, as soon as we begin a course of study, exactly what they have to do in order to pass the examination at the end. We may be looking at the most wonderful piece of English Literature, or exploring a fascinating management topic, but students can still feel that they have no time to ponder the wider implications of what they are doing. Passing the examination, getting a good degree, is everything, to the exclusion of all else. If you use this book in all its aspects, I hope that you will have the time, free from worrying, to look around you and enjoy what you are doing, appreciate the pleasures of university and make the most of your life as an undergraduate.

People will tell you that these are 'the best years of your life'. This is all very well in retrospect (and, for most people, it is true) but it is difficult to see this if you are drowning under a sea of books, or slaving over a hot computer producing three essays in one week. If you are able to manage your degree programme effectively, and this book will help you to do that, you will at least be able to look up long enough to enjoy your time at university and appreciate why these might, indeed, be the best years of your life.

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