

# Academic orientation

- Being an independent learner
- Adopting good study strategies
- Finding information about research projects
- Writing a research proposal

*This unit introduces some of the skills you will need to develop in order to be successful in higher education. It also looks at what is involved in beginning a research project.*

## 1 Being an independent learner


**1.1** Students at most universities are expected to be independent learners. Tick the sentences below which describe characteristics of this type of learner.

### Independent learners:

- 1 make choices about what courses to study within a programme.
- 2 set their own short- and long-term learning goals.
- 3 leave assignment writing until the last minute.
- 4 know who to ask for help in case of difficulty.
- 5 know where to find information they need.
- 6 use the library, online information and other resources effectively.
- 7 wait for their tutor to tell them what to read.
- 8 identify areas where they are weak and need to do further work.
- 9 can conduct an investigation on a particular topic with limited guidance.
- 10 accept what they read in textbooks and on websites as facts.

**1.2 a** Choose two of the characteristics of an independent learner that you think you already have, and two that you need to develop. How might you develop the weaker characteristics?

**b** In pairs or small groups, compare your answers.

**1.3**  **0.1** Listen to Max talking about differences in being a student on an undergraduate and then a postgraduate programme.

- 1 In which programme was he expected to study more independently?
- 2 What particular differences between the programmes does he mention?

*Note: The amount of independent study you are expected to do may also depend on the subject you are studying. For example, science students often spend a lot of time doing supervised study in the laboratory and are given much of the information they need in lectures, while arts students often have less-structured study programmes and are expected to read more widely.*

## 2 Adopting good study strategies

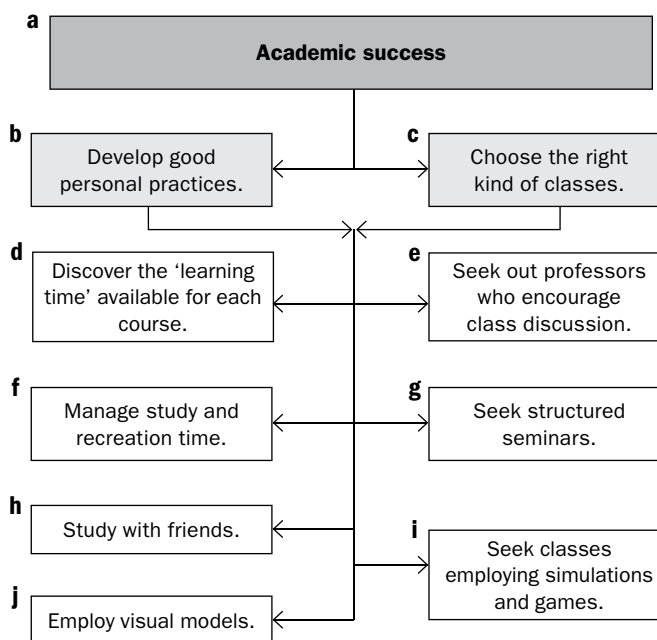
**2.1** An international student, who will shortly go to university in an English-speaking country, has asked you what study strategies to use in order to achieve academic success.

- 1 Work in pairs or small groups and suggest, based on your experience, at least three pieces of advice.
- 2 Share your ideas with the class.



Max Reibman is from the United States. He is now studying for a PhD in History at a British university.

- 2.2 a** You are going to read extracts from an article about academic success. Study this chart from the article, where recommendations are made. Is any advice you talked about in 2.1 mentioned?



*Note: In the United States, 'professor' refers to any full-time university teacher. In the UK, a professor is a teacher of the highest rank in a university.*

- b** In these extracts from the article, the writer reports research on which his recommendations are based. Read the extracts (1–5) below and match them with sections of the chart (a–j).

- 1** Research indicates that after exposure to between ten and twenty minutes of continuous lecturing, learning falls off rapidly. Luckily, several teaching practices counter this tendency. First, look for professors who ask rhetorical questions every ten minutes or so (Weaver and Cotrell, 1986) and who reinforce material by asking for nonthreatening forms of participation such as a show of hands or volunteer speakers with examples confirming or countering the material (Hunter, 1983).
- 2** Gage and Berliner (1992) argue that models provide "accurate and useful representations of knowledge that is needed when solving problems in some particular domain" (p.314). Specifically, they found that students who study models and conceptual maps before a lecture may recall as much as 57 percent more of the conceptual information than students who do not study and discuss such maps and models.
- 3** Available learning time depends on the calendar established by the university for each semester and the time allotted by professors for covering various topics in each class during the semester. Perseverance refers to the student's intensity and focus on academic content during the allocated learning time. Carroll's (1963) study suggests that all else being equal, the more time you spend on a course and the better you focus on the material, the more successful you will be.

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- 4** Although informal and less-structured classes are employed to stimulate engagement in American classrooms, the research mentioned earlier indicates that these practices may impede international student learning. In addition, international students are often unaccustomed to frequent testing and have more experience taking essay-oriented examinations.
- 5** Research indicates that classroom atmosphere and especially the quality and degree of faculty–student interaction in American universities trouble international students (Craig, 1981; Edwards and Tonkin, 1990). These findings reflect the fact that most international students are accustomed to listening and learning rather than speaking in class. International students should therefore consider seeking out professors who lecture well.

Abel, C. F. (2002). Academic success and the international student: research and recommendations. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 117, 13–20.

- 2.3** Does the evidence reported in these extracts match your own experience of academic study? In pairs, discuss whether you agree or disagree with Abel's recommendations for academic success. Do you think any are impractical?

### 3 Finding information about research projects

Many undergraduate and postgraduate students have to undertake a research project as part of their programme and write this up in a dissertation or thesis (a long piece of writing, normally considerably longer than an essay). The terms 'dissertation' and 'thesis' are used differently in different parts of the world. In British universities, 'dissertation' often refers to undergraduate work and 'thesis' to postgraduate work (as in the website below). In the United States, 'dissertation' refers to the work submitted for a doctorate (PhD).

- 3.1** Universities are providing an increasing amount of information online. As an independent learner, you should make sure you know what is available. Look at the university website on page 13 and decide where you can find answers to questions about writing a dissertation. Match questions 1–10 below to options a–c.
- a on this part of the website
  - b probably on another part of the same website
  - c probably not on this website
- 1 What are the sections of a typical dissertation?
  - 2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of using interviews and questionnaires in my research?
  - 3 Should I pay the people who answer my research questionnaire?
  - 4 Does my dissertation have to follow my initial plan exactly?
  - 5 What is the deadline for handing in my dissertation?
  - 6 Where should I include ideas for further research?
  - 7 How do I avoid plagiarism?
  - 8 How much help will my supervisor give me?
  - 9 What shall I include in the introduction?
  - 10 Where can I find a list of possible topics for my dissertation?

## Companion for Undergraduate Dissertations

Sociology, Anthropology, Politics, Social Policy, Social Work and Criminology

### Contents

- ▣ About this site
- ▣ What is a dissertation?
- ▣ Getting started
- ▣ Help with finding literature and research
- ▣ Formulating the research question
- ▣ Finding appropriate methodologies
- ▣ Responsibility in the research process
- ▣ Research ethics
- ▣ Supervision of the dissertation
- ▣ Writing the dissertation
- ▣ Developing your academic style of writing
- ▣ Plagiarism

### Resources

- ▣ Further reading
- ▣ Research papers

knowledge and understanding, and show you the areas that need further thought and research.

It is useful, therefore, to write the proposal and to retain it for reference and revision. It helps to attempt such an abstract even if your supervisor has not suggested that you write one. However, practice varies, and your supervisor will advise you on how to proceed. As you continue to write the main chapters of the work, you may find that your initial plan has changed. This means that when you have completed the chapters that form the main body of your dissertation you can return to the proposal and revise it as much as you need, to form the introduction.

It is highly advisable to draft a plan of the dissertation. There is a lot in common between different dissertations regarding the structure and although you do not need to stick slavishly to a standard plan, such a plan is very helpful as a template to impose some order on what may seem an unmanageable task. Here is an indicative structure that might help you with your initial plan.

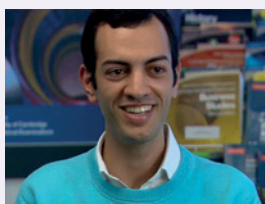
### Dissertation structure

| Section                                | Section information  |
|--|--|
| <b>Introduction</b>                    | The field of study, the research question, the hypothesis (if any) or, more generally, the research question that is to be investigated. It should also include a summary of the contents and main arguments in the dissertation.  |
| <b>The Literature Review</b>           | Usually, this comes immediately after the introductory chapter. This may be more than one chapter, but should certainly be written in sections. This should include previous work done on the field of study and anything that you consider to be relevant to the hypothesis or research question and to its investigation. It will include a large number of references to the literature in your chosen area.  |
| <b>Methodology</b>                     | This section should include an account of the research questions and/or hypotheses to be investigated, relevant methods of investigation and an argument for why you think these methods are the most appropriate ones for the question and for your circumstances. You should consider the benefits of your chosen method as well as identifying any disadvantages and how you overcame them. Ethical issues and the ways in which you dealt with them should be noted. This section should also discuss any variations from the original fieldwork plan, and should conclude with a reflection on the experience of doing fieldwork. |
| <b>Findings</b>                        | This section should present the main findings of your research together with an account of the strengths and weaknesses of your data relative to your research question/hypothesis. You may also wish to include an evaluation of any difficulties you encountered in collecting and analysing data, together with an assessment of how this affected your plan of research.   |
| <b>Evaluation</b>                      | Here you can provide an assessment of whether and how well you were able to answer your research question and/or confirm/reject your hypotheses.   |
| <b>Discussion</b>                      | This chapter must relate the findings to theoretical/policy discussion in your literature review. You should NOT introduce any new literature at this stage.   |
| <b>Conclusions and recommendations</b> | An overall assessment of what you found out, how successful you were and suggestions for future research.  |

Available at [www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk/s11.html](http://www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk/s11.html)

### Focus on your subject

Try to find a website which gives advice on writing dissertations or theses in your subject at your level of study. Look first for information from your university (i.e. where you are studying or plan to study). If this is not possible, search for a website from another university. Does it give you advice on what sections should go into the dissertation? Are there any differences between these and the sections suggested on the website in 3.1?



Youness Bouzinab is from Belgium. He is now studying for an MPhil in Assyriology (the study of ancient Iraq) at a British university.

## 4 Writing a research proposal

Unlike a taught Master's degree, an MPhil (Master of Philosophy) is usually awarded for the successful completion of a research project written up in a dissertation or thesis.

### 4.1 a You are going to listen to Youness talking about his research proposal. He has included the following parts. Decide the order you expect them to be in the proposal.

- Research questions
- Methods
- Conclusion
- Outline of previous research

### b 0.2 Listen to Youness and check your answers.

### c 0.2 Listen again. What is the main way his research is different from work done by other researchers?

### d Why it is important to include a statement in a research proposal (and in the final dissertation) saying how your work is different from previous research? Share your ideas with the class.

### e Think of one piece of research that you are familiar with from your own subject. In pairs, take turns to explain how it is different from previous research.