Managing external study

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Opportunities and challenges of studying externally

For many people, external study is an ideal way to gain a university qualification. For others, it is the only study option available for a particular unit. In either case, external study offers greater flexibility, convenience and independence in managing your study. It can be a very rewarding mode of study. However, to be successful, four key skillsets are required. These are the ability:

• to master the on-line technology
• to be a self-motivated, independent learner
• to manage your time effectively
• to collaborate with others to share common challenges and learning experiences.

Accessing the technology

Prior to your first classes, ensure you have a reliable computer, recent versions of Word and Excel, a reliable broadband connection, and a headset with microphone for participating in lectures and discussions.

Blackboard is the software used by the university to manage all aspects of your study. It is the same software used by on-campus students but some features are used more frequently by external students. These include the ability:

• to listen to and watch lectures live or at a time to suit your circumstances by using the Blackboard Collaborate feature
• to interact live on-line with your lecturer and other students by using the Blackboard IM feature
• to share files by using File Exchange
• to post questions to other students or your lecturer by using Discussion Boards.

As soon as you receive your username and password, go into the university’s website (mySCU). There are two areas you should explore. These are located at the top of the MySCU webpage as shown by the red arrows in the graphic below.

**myUnits:** click on myUnits, then click on each of your units. Explore the contents of the menu items on the left hand side of the screen to locate Unit Information Guides, Study Guides and other learning resources such as myReadings (online course-related texts). Also identify the place where you Submit Assignments. In particular, you should practice connecting to Blackboard Collaborate for each of your units. This is where lectures will be presented and recorded. To access this area, you will be asked to download Java software. To do this, just follow the online prompts.

**myServices:** click on myServices and explore the range of services available there. In particular, check out the Library Services area and the Learning Support area (in particular, click on the Academic Skills Development area to check out the range of Quick Guides to help you in your studies). If you have any problems with the site, the IT Support contact details are also available in this area under Technology Support.

Time spent before lectures start familiarising yourself with both these areas of mySCU will streamline your entry into external study.

**Becoming a self-motivated, independent learner**

Not surprisingly, highly motivated students are those most likely to succeed. To identify your motivation, write down the reasons that prompted you to become a university student and identify SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, results-focussed and time-bound) goals that will motivate you and remind you of your deeper reasons for studying. Place them prominently in your study area.

University education aims to develop independent learners. As an external student, your ability to be an independent learner is particularly important. This does not mean you cannot ask questions or collaborate with others in the learning process: it means you have sufficient knowledge of the course requirements, familiarity with educational technologies and your own learning processes to manage your study effectively. It also means you have self-management skills such as how to manage your time.
Effective time management

Some hints for external students:

• do not underestimate how much time you need to devote to external study. The greater flexibility available to external students can be a trap
• each unit requires 10 to 12 hours of your time each week (including lectures, study and preparing for and working on assignments)
• avoid getting overwhelmed. Stick to the weekly timetable of topics. Do not either read too far ahead in your Study Guide, or get too far behind
• have a conversation with family and friends to set expectations around your availability – just because you do not go to campus does not mean you have not taken on a significant commitment
• prepare a session planner and a detailed weekly planner. Modify them until they really work for you (see Managing your time Quick Guide).

Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning is increasingly used in university education because it reflects trends in the workplace made possible by technology. The extent to which this approach is applied varies greatly among units. Recent research (Salmon, 2011) shows that external students are particularly advantaged by this approach. Examples include:

• small group projects that encourage students to work together using wikis (online areas where users can share and edit documents)
• Discussion Boards where online discussions can be held and all members can contribute
• interactive online conferences held using one particular feature of the Blackboard software, Blackboard IM.

Use the Blackboard software available to you in your learning site to connect with fellow students. It will reduce the sense of isolation that you might sometimes feel as an external student. If you have a question, you might find the answer and some very practical advice posted on the Discussion Board by other students or your lecturer. For some, a sense of being part of a group can make the experience of external study not only easier but also more enjoyable. You might even consider establishing a buddy group of fellow students who live nearby. If, on the other hand, you like to study alone, you can still have access to all this information.

Stay in touch by checking your emails and Discussion Boards every day. Remember, however, that the university is a professional environment and all communications should be respectful and appropriate.

A final piece of advice: always ask for help. This can be done by email to your lecturer, your School’s student adviser, or through the Group Discussion Board. As part of your preparation for study, create a list of your key contact people so they are available if you need them.

Good luck with your studies.
Related Quick Guides

To find the Quick Guides listed below, go to MyServices > Learning Support > Academic Skills Development and then choose Quick Guides from the menu on the left hand side of the screen.

Tips on Getting Started at University, What’s in a Unit Information Guide?, Managing Your Time

Reference