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SMARTER STUDY SKILLS

THE

STUDY

SKILLS

BOOK

THIRD
EDITION

KATHLEEN McMILLAN & JONATHAN WEYERS

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PREFACE

We're delighted that you've chosen *The Study Skills Book* and we'd like to think it's because this book promises insight into the university experience and gives you plenty of useful tips to help you settle into the new rhythms of university life and learning.

Whatever your age and experience, learning at university marks an exciting new phase in your life – a time of anticipation and of new challenges. Very quickly you'll be faced with sorting out your life as a student, attending your first lectures, getting logged on to the university computer system, email and e-learning tools. There will be a lot of information to gather, filter and make into some sort of sense. All the while you'll be meeting new people of different ages and outlooks who are in exactly the same position. All in all, it's a stimulating but demanding time. Learning at university builds on one basic notion: that is that students, regardless of age or experience, are good at organising themselves and so will quickly conform to the standards that the university community expects. As experienced academics, we know that this is not achieved quite as quickly as everyone – staff, students (and their families) – might wish, partly because there is so much to learn how to do.

This book is about helping new (and not so new) students gain and develop the skills, attributes and knowledge that universities require of them. Of course, you will already have some of these skills – from school, from college, from employment and even just from life in general – but this book takes you further. In 'Understanding what university involves' and 'Managing yourself', we begin with some tips and insights about what university involves and then take you through the very first days when you're coming to terms with your new environment and deciding how you're going to organise your life.

Then we move into the kinds of things that you'll need to be able to do as your course gets underway. This all comes into 'Developing your learning skills' – useful tips on practical things such as taking notes in lectures, using the library, engaging with e-learning and thinking critically. As your course gathers pace, you'll find that you're having to tackle all sorts of writing assignments and in 'Improving your academic writing' you'll find valuable suggestions to guide you from planning to submission, with help along the way on topics such as punctuation, spelling and grammar, so that your writing is well developed and meets academic requirements.

As you work your way through your first semester, you'll find that you encounter all sorts of different kinds of assessment – in lab practicals, in debates, in tests and other written submissions. 'Performing well in course assessments' gives you some insights as to how these assessments work and how you can gain the best marks possible. Then we come to Section 6: 'Succeeding in exams', which gives you tried-and-tested tips from revision technique to coping with exam nerves. Finally, in 'Planning for the future' we can peep over the edge of the university world and look to the future by considering career planning and kick-starting your career.

We had many kinds of students in mind when we decided to write this text and we hope that it will meet your personal needs – regardless of your experience and background. We've tried to



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remain faithful to the idea that this book is one that you can dip into in time of need. We' to evolve a layout that makes information easy to find.

We wish you the best of times at university and hope that the tips we have collated will help you succeed in all you do, academically and socially, tackle assignments with confidence and produce better results. Despite all the advice given here, we acknowledge that there is always an element of luck in any good performance, and we hope you get this when and if required. We'd be delighted to hear your opinion of the book, any suggestions you have for additions and improvements, and especially if you feel that it has made a positive difference to the way you study and approach university life.

Kathleen McMillan and Jonathan Weyers

1

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The Study Skills Book is divided into 71 chapters, each providing you with tips for a specific set of skills. These are arranged in seven parts, covering student life from choices made at entry, through to final exams and job-seeking. The aim is to provide bite-sized discussions of each topic that allow you to find and digest relevant material as easily as possible.

At the start of each chapter there is a brief introduction to the topics covered, then the core material, divided into appropriate sections. Additional tips, definitions, examples and illustrations are provided in three different types of tip boxes, as shown on page 2. Some of these points are repeated in different chapters where this is justified on grounds of relevance, bearing in mind that the book is likely to be consulted on a chapter-by-chapter basis.

The core material in each chapter is as concise and straightforward as possible. It is laid out in numbered lists and bullet points wherever appropriate. Figures and tables are used to provide examples and to delve into 'deeper' or more detailed issues separately from the main text. Blank versions of some tables are included in the Appendix, in case you may wish to use these. Copyright on these forms is waived, so you can copy them for personal use as required.

Many cross-references to other chapters (Ch) have been included to avoid duplication of material and thereby save space. At the end of each chapter there is a set of practical tips that supplements the advice presented within the text. The text references within chapters are collated on pages 449–50.

You should treat all these elements as items on a menu from which you can select suitable ideas and approaches. Our advice is to adopt those you feel will fit with your needs and personality, but at the same time we would encourage you to experiment. If you are already using some of the tips successfully, take confidence from the fact that you are probably doing the right thing. If ideas are new, please keep an open mind. Confronted with lack of success, many students simply try harder with a set of failed techniques, when a complete overhaul of their approach to learning may be required.

Practical tips relating to the specific chapters are given after the core material. These tips synthesise the content of the chapter and present the opportunity to adjust your approach or behaviour so that you do truly move forward in developing that particular skill area.

Some of the tips and ideas that you will find in *The Study Skills Book* are integrated, albeit in slightly different formats, into *The Smarter Student Planner* (see the references section for further details) which has been designed to help you to develop the key skills of problem-solving, action planning, reflection and lateral thinking by providing an easy to follow monthly planner along with week-at-a-glance space for all your appointments and assignments. It includes additional weekly and monthly tips that relate to the rhythms of the university year and supports your learning with a number of copyright-free templates for exam revision. The planner also

provides information on grammar, spelling and punctuation as well as notes on basic maths and numeracy. These all provide quick access to reassuring information that you may need to complete assessed work.

Tip boxes and practical tips

The boxes are of three types:



Smart tip boxes emphasise key advice to ensure you adopt a successful approach.



Information boxes provide additional information, such as useful definitions or examples.



Query boxes raise questions for you to consider about your personal approach to the topic.



At the end of each chapter, there's also a **Practical tips** section with additional tips. You should regard this as a menu from which to select the ideas that appeal to you and your learning personality.

2

PREPARING FOR UNIVERSITY

What you and your family need to consider

If you want to get off to a flying start at university, there are several aspects of student life that you should think about beforehand. This chapter prompts you to reflect on possible changes in your study methods, financial situation, accommodation and personal life.

Going to university is a life-changing event. It will be an experience that is exhilarating and mind-expanding, but perhaps a little daunting at first. In this book, we aim to peel away some of the myths and mysteries of academic study and help you to make the most of your university years.

Self-orientation and decision-making are themes of this chapter. The aim is to ensure that your start is as positive as possible. This reflective process is one you may wish to return to from time to time as you progress through university, both to assess your progress and reset your targets (see also **Ch 7**). The checklists presented here are designed to focus your thoughts, rather than feed you answers; your responses will depend on your own situation and personality. Like much at university, success in turning these thoughts into action will depend on *you* rather than anyone else.

GOAL SETTING AT UNIVERSITY

Your goals at university may vary according to whether you are planning your next move after school or college or whether you are returning to study after doing other things. For both types of student, a good question to ask yourself is: 'Where do I want to be in five years' time and then in ten years' time?'

To help you answer these questions, do the 'goal-setting exercise' in the Query Box on page 4. You may not have answers to all the questions right now, but they will help you to start thinking about deeper issues in your life and how you might tackle the challenges of university.

Whether you have just left school or college or are returning to study after time away from a learning environment, the challenges of university life remain broadly similar. It's your responses to them that will possibly be quite different.



Coming to university – a goal-setting exercise

The answers to these questions should help you define your life and study goals:

- What are your life goals?
- What career path do you have as your aim?
- If you haven't chosen a career, will going to university help you choose one?
- What subject(s) do you need to study to achieve your career goals?
- What combination of subjects will best keep your options open?
- How might university limit your options?
- Apart from a qualification, what do you want from your time as a university student?

ACADEMIC ASPECTS

A large portion of this book deals with the skills required for study at university level, many of which will be quite different from those required at school or college. Before embarking on your course, you may benefit from carrying out a mental 'audit' of your current abilities to allow you to focus on areas where you can gain maximum benefit from improvement.

You might start this process by considering the questions below. If you find the final question rather open-ended, a scan through the list of chapters in this book (pages v–vii) will provide a sense of the range of skills you will be expected to have mastered by the time you graduate. Also **Ch 5** provides further information on this topic.



Coming to university – a reality check

How much do you really know about what studying at university involves?

- a lot a fair amount a little not a lot

What level of experience do you bring to university learning?

- a lot a fair amount a little not a lot

How much effort are you prepared to make in order to graduate successfully?

- a lot a fair amount a little not a lot

How much support will be necessary from others?

- a lot a fair amount a little not a lot

What skills do you think you will need to develop?

There is much you can do personally to improve your academic skills levels:

- sign up for appropriate skills-related courses and workshops (for example, those for IT effective writing);
- read textbooks, including this one, that provide relevant guidance and advice;
- search for web-based resources that fit your needs;
- seek help from tutors and support staff – they will provide an impartial, confidential and free service;
- absorb and act upon the feedback you receive on your assessed work.

FINANCIAL MATTERS

For many people, the decision to enter university has important financial implications. No matter what your personal circumstances, it is probably helpful to work out, in broad terms, how much your university education will cost. Figure 2.1 gives some broad categories of expenditure for a typical student and shows what proportion of the total costs each is estimated to take up, and Table 2.1 provides a listing of potential costs to take into account, some of which may be unexpected. The questions on page 7 will also help you define your responses to the financial challenges of university life. **Ch 9** covers other issues that will help you to create a working budget to manage your finances.

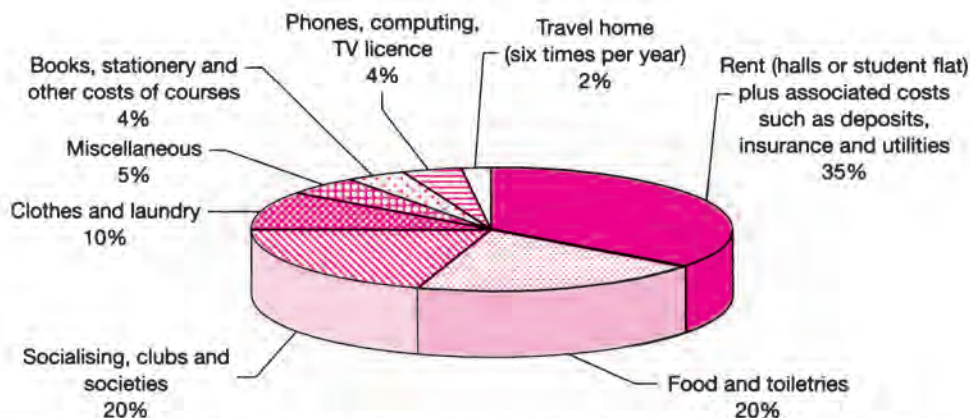


Figure 2.1 Breakdown of the costs of being a student (per annum). These proportions are approximate and assume that the student is living in self-catering accommodation. Depending on location, the total costs may amount to £6250–10000 (2011–12 figures, *excluding fees*) and in some cities the proportional cost of accommodation may be greater. A student living at home might have reduced accommodation costs, but possibly higher travel spending. Mature students may have a different pattern of spending related to pre-existing responsibilities.



Questions to ask yourself about financing your university studies

- Have I got a good idea of what my university education will cost me?
- How much will my partner or family be helping me?
- How much debt am I prepared to take on?
- How will I control my expenditure?
- Will I need to take on part-time work to finance myself?
- Will I need to get a summer job to help finance myself?
- How will I balance the time and energy needed to work with the time and energy required for study, especially close to exams?

Table 2.1 Expected and unexpected costs of being at university. This list is not exhaustive, but is designed to help you anticipate your main categories of expenditure (see also Figure 2.1). Table Z.1 (page 446) is a spreadsheet to help you manage your budget as a student (see also [Ch 9](#)).

| Category of expenditure | Examples | Comments |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Fees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tuition fees | These vary according to where you come from and where you are studying (see text) |
| Accommodation costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hall fees ● Rent/mortgage ● Insurance ● Utilities (gas, electricity, phone) | At the present time, students do not have to pay council tax. Insurance and utility costs are inclusive in some types of accommodation |
| Living and social costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Food ● Drink ● Entertainment ● Clubs and societies | Even if living in catered accommodation, you will incur additional food costs, e.g. at lunchtime or in the evening. Entertainment costs will depend on what sort of 'social animal' you intend to be |
| Travel costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fares or season tickets ● Car maintenance and fuel ● Parking ● Tolls ● Visits home | These are greatly dependent on the distance between your accommodation and the campus site(s) you need to visit. Student discounts can apply to some forms of transport |
| Study costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Books, stationery ● Equipment ● Lab deposits ● Field trips ● Computing ● Photocopying and printing | Equipment costs, lab deposits and costs of field trips will only apply in certain subjects |
| Personal costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mobile phone ● Laundry ● Toiletries ● Haircuts ● Clothing ● Presents | These are dependent on lifestyle and how fashion conscious you may be |
| Other | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Childminding/babysitting ● Holidays ● TV licence | A TV licence is required for all persons in shared accommodation unless it is a group let |

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Is there a secret to successful study? The answer is 'yes'! There are some essential skills that will help you to improve your performance and results at university, whatever course you are following.

Using proven techniques and practical tips to help you to focus your efforts and develop successful study skills and strategies, **THE STUDY SKILLS BOOK** provides practical answers to questions such as:

- What is the best way to plan an essay or dissertation?
- What do lecturers expect from you in a tutorial?
- Where should you focus your efforts for maximum impact?

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- Practical solutions are presented for the most common problems
- A common-sense approach is offered using checklists and tips

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