

A 10-point guide to getting the best out of your university degree

For thousands of young people a whole new chapter of their life is about to begin – this is how to make the most of it



(Image: Getty Images/Wavebreak Media)

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For the nearly 470,000 students from the UK who applied for a place in a British university, Thursday was the most important day of the year.

And for those fortunate enough to receive the grades which enable them to start university in September a period of anticipation and excitement has begun.

I can say with some authority that going university is truly a life-changing experience. A period of opportunity for learning and development the like of which the majority of 'freshers' will not have experienced before.

It's a daunting time, too. Many students will be moving away from home for the first time into an unfamiliar academic and social environment.

The good news is that universities realise this and never lose sight of the fact that it is students who are their lifeblood. They are the university. As I've written before, it is the duty of people like me to ensure that students feel a part of university life and not apart from it.

But new students should remember one very important thing above all else: on your first day in the lecture theatre or seminar room everyone is equal and past qualifications matter nought. All students, without exception, with application and hard work, can attain a first class degree.

With that in mind, below is a 10-point guide (it's not definitive and it's certainly not entirely comprehensive) to getting the best out of whichever degree is being read for.

Be confident in your own ability

You have been accepted on to your course of choice. You have the intellectual ability to succeed. If you don't have the educational qualifications of your class mates – don't worry.

A-level excellence (or equivalent) does not necessarily mean that degree study will come easily. As I say, the key to success is hard work and past efforts are completely insignificant.

A degree course is a great leveller! Everyone is starting from the same point.

Expect to be under-confident or insecure every now and again – this keeps us on our toes. I have met professors with years of experience who shake like lettuce leaves in a hurricane before they have to speak in public. Self-doubt is natural and to be embraced – it's how we deal with it that matters.

Never be afraid to ask questions

No question is ever too daft. If you require an explanation – ask for it. Lecturers appreciate this.

In a seminar/workshop room, no questions at all from students doesn't mean they've got the point – it can often mean they are either bored or asleep.

Asking questions shows engagement, indicates a vibrant mind and above all shows that you are thinking critically.

Following on from this...

Never be afraid of being wrong

Being at university is a learning process. No-one, especially this lecturer, knows everything.

No individual is the finished article. A good course encourages experimentation of ideas where outcomes can vary.

If you receive marks lower than expected in your first year – that may be because you are learning in a completely different way.

If you do go drastically awry then that's okay, too. Remember, lecturers are there to teach you. You are not a hindrance. You are the lifeblood of the university.

They will help you to succeed. The key thing is communication...

Talk to your tutors

You will all have personal tutors. Establish a relationship – go and see them regularly.

They are there to provide advice – academic and pastoral. Cliché alert – if no-one knows what the issue is, no-one can help.

Talk to your module leaders – stay behind after class for a chat, introduce yourself.

All lecturers love this and after a while will tell you absolutely anything you wish to know – such is our need for human engagement!

More seriously, every student I have taught who has engaged with his or her department has been a successful one.

Key point: YOU CANNOT 'WING' A FIRST CLASS DEGREE.

Use the library

A simple point, I know – but this is the centre of university learning. All the materials conducive to your success are located here.

It provides a quiet learning environment too – away from whatever distractions exist outside. On a more general note – travel into college whenever you can.

It's all about engagement – with many courses you may be required to attend relatively few lectures, with material available remotely. It's easy then to lose touch with university.

You will be amazed at what it has to offer...

(Image: Nick White)

Use the university

Your experience need not simply be about studying for your degree. It's about the whole experience – the word university comes from the Latin 'universitas' meaning 'the whole'.

Seek out which clubs and societies you can join, what training programmes are available, either for free or at a discount rate.

Use the careers service, investigate study abroad, summer teaching schools, opportunities for work experience et cetera, et cetera.

A common regret from students on graduation is that they never realised that uni had so much to offer. Your three years will be over in a flash – take advantage!

Enjoy your learning

You may be surprised by how many students, having made the choice to come to university, see learning and being asked to study as a chore and inconvenience.

Enjoy it – embrace the newness or complexities of your study. Be prepared to work, to read and to critically analyse. This is key. An enthusiasm for your subject will make the possible difficulties of learning and the accumulation of knowledge something which you will hardly notice taking place.

Every first class student I've taught had this enthusiasm in some form.

Engage with your fellow students

You may be considerably older than your colleagues or you may be from different cultural or geographical backgrounds – but you are united by the common pursuit.

Don't be afraid of each other – take it from me, most of you will be quiet, decent and eager to make friends.

I have yet to be in a teaching situation where the presence of students from different cultural backgrounds did not improve the learning conditions. Learn from each other, not just the set texts.

Think about university as you would gym membership

It's not an original comparison – but it works.

If you pay a monthly fee to a gym and never visit, you won't get fit. But you still pay.

At university, you are paying a great deal of money to visit a centre of excellence where there are the best facilities and best trainers. If you don't engage you will not achieve anything nearing your full potential. BUT if you do engage then the right things are in place to make success probable.

The point is – it's up to you. You get out what you put in.

Think about what you gain

Graduation day 2020. The culmination of three years of hard work and a degree qualification from an internationally-recognised institution.

It's hard to overstate the importance of this day, the sense of pride and achievement you will feel. Remember the added value of your degree:

- You will have expert knowledge in your particular field.
- You will have attained the ability to research, write and critique according to highest academic standards.
- You will have the skills to work both independently and in groups.
- You will recognise the importance of intellectual objectivity, preparation, meeting deadlines.
- And, of course, your chances in the job market will be significantly improved.

Good luck!