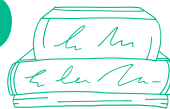


University



Academics



How is university different to school?

Learning at university is likely to be very different from what you experienced at school. You may hear people talk about the need for you to engage with ‘active’ or ‘self-directed’ learning. This simply means that you will be in control of your own learning much more than before. While, to begin with, this can seem strange and even daunting – in time most students realise that learning in this way can be more personally fulfilling and enjoyable.

That doesn’t mean you should expect to be able to learn like this right away. You need to give yourself time to learn how to learn as a university student. Be patient, use our tips below and the resources at your university and everything will come together.

Expectations

In university the expectation is that you are now an independent adult. That means that you are in charge of your own behaviour. You are responsible for you!

Professors and tutors likely won’t notice if you’re not in class and they won’t be calling you to check up on any papers or assignments you didn’t hand in. It is up to you to keep track of what you need to do and to motivate yourself to do what needs to be done. This can be a challenge for some students. Finding a friend in class to attend classes together or to be a study partner, or even just reminding yourself how much money you’re paying to be in university might help you focus on your personal responsibilities and help motivate you to do what you need to do.

Pace

Rather than having lectures/seminars on a subject every day; in university, you often have contact time just once or twice a week (although some courses may be more frequent). This means that you will likely be covering a lot of material in class, and moving through the material quite quickly. Many students find this difficult at first. Course sizes can be large, which can make it difficult for you to ask questions when you don’t understand something. That can lead you to feeling left behind. You may be required to complete a number of readings in between lectures – some of which will be talked about in seminars and some of which might just be background information. Even if you’re not required to do extra reading, reviewing your notes and doing independent research into the areas you don’t understand can help you keep up.

Also, remember that every professor or tutor should have office hours – times you can go into their office and ask questions. Just make sure you arrive prepared with a list of questions and don’t expect them to teach the entire class to you over again one-on-one.



Give yourself 3-4 hours of work per module outside of class time to work on assignments or just to keep up with what is being taught. It may help you to think about university as a job. The classes are only a small part of your “work”. Much of what you need to do happens outside of class.

Academic workload

Your workload might increase quite a bit compared to school – and your professors or tutors will often not be aware of (or concerned with) the workload you have in your other classes. This means that you might end up with multiple exams and assignments, all due in the same week, or even the same day. Occasionally, your professors or tutors might be willing to accommodate deadline changes, but more often than not, they won't. Your best course of action is to plan ahead – review each class' syllabus at the start of the semester, map out all of your deadlines in a planner, and figure out how soon you need to start studying, writing, and researching for each task in order to get them done in time.

Leaving things to the last minute or planning to do an all-nighter is not a sustainable long-term strategy.



Set your “deadlines” for assignments 24 hours in advance of when it really is. Try to hit the date you set. This gives you a bit of wiggle room in case something unexpected comes up.

Feeling unprepared

Some students feel as if school didn't prepare them enough for university – whether it's the independence, expectations, structure, work load, or competencies (such as writing and study skills) that they need. This may mean that you feel overloaded or stressed by university life. However, these challenges are completely normal and actually expected!

Many students feel like this – remember that part of your learning is learning how to be a successful student. Very few students know how to do this right away. If there are things you don't know how to do yet, simply see them as a new challenge that you can meet by developing some new skills and changing your expectations. If you label the emotions that you are feeling as a signal that you are getting ready to rise to a challenge, you will create a much healthier approach to university life. If you interpret the “stress” that you are feeling as negative and try to avoid the challenge, you will experience less joy and excitement about your new environment and deprive yourself of new learning.



For more information, see our section on managing stress.

Students are different, schools are different, and each university or college is different – meaning that there are almost always going to be at least a few people who may feel overwhelmed by their new situation. If this feels like you, remind yourself that you are the person in charge of your university experience. Go to the campus writing/study centre or make an appointment with your professor/tutor to ask for extra help. Consider starting a study group with people from your course. Reach out to people in your residence, seminars, extracurricular activities, your Students' Union or elsewhere to create your own support system. And remember – just because your friends and family may be far away, it doesn't mean they can't still support you from afar.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't keep it to yourself. Reach out for help; there are many things that can be done to help you, help yourself.



For more information, visit Student Mind's website.

Procrastination

Are you constantly putting things off and making excuses? Procrastination can lead to challenges in getting your work done on time. Some people, however, procrastinate just the right amount to put them into their sweet spot for getting work done. We know that too much stress can get in the way of getting things done but we also know that too little stress makes it harder to get things done. You need to find your own sweet spot – just the right amount of stress for you.



Remember that the amount of work you have now will likely be much more than you had in school. You will likely need to recalibrate where your sweet spot is when you reach campus so that you don't over procrastinate and get overloaded with deadlines.

Why do some people procrastinate too much?

Feeling unprepared

Sometimes the task requires complex skills or knowledge. We may hold off starting the task, assuming it would be easier to wait until we have more knowledge and know exactly what to do to avoid failure.



What to do

- Make a list of unanswered questions about the task that you think might be holding you back. Do a little research on your unanswered questions because sometimes the answer is much simpler than you thought! If you can't find the answer on your own, schedule time to talk to your professor or tutor about your questions.
- Think of failure as a learning opportunity. If you jump in, you may be surprised at what you learn simply by trying.

Not enough time

The task seems overwhelming and may require a lot of time and energy.



What to do

When you break the task down into smaller chunks (see #1), give each one a reasonable time frame. You can get a lot done in just 15 minutes if there are no interruptions. It might be helpful to set a timer for each segment to help keep yourself focused.

Don't enjoy it

→ **What to do**
Overcoming procrastination can sometimes require us to connect to positive motivation. When beginning an assignment try to find a positive emotional link to the work – ask yourself ‘why do I care about this?’ What do I believe is important?’ What about this subject makes me passionate \ angry \ frustrated \ excited etc.?’ It is much easier to start a piece of work if you care about the content.

Distractions

Sometimes it's hard to focus because we're in our comfortable everyday environment with all the distractions of daily living.

→ **What to do**
Take control of the situation. Turn off the phone, internet, and television and find a private study space. If you need to listen to music to block out other sounds, try listening to classical (or something without words) in your headphones as it's less likely to distract you.

Too challenging

Sometimes we avoid a task because we know it will be difficult and it can be hard to figure out where to begin.

→ **What to do**
Break the task down into smaller, easier steps. This makes it seem less overwhelming and gives you the satisfaction of checking things off your ‘to do’ list sooner.

Too many projects on the go

Often we put off tasks because we are swamped. It's easy to get bogged down in little details and forget about the big picture.

→ **What to do**

- Try to focus on the most important assignments first. Remember not everything that feels urgent is important.
- Remember that doing something is better than doing nothing. If you feel totally overwhelmed by a big project, it is okay to work on the little things first (e.g., title page, bibliography), as long as you don't forget about the big picture.

Feeling guilty

Sometimes we put off tasks because we feel guilty for not spending enough time with friends or family, or not participating in an activity. It can be hard to find a balance, especially at first.

→ **What to do**

- Consider rewarding yourself for a few hours of work by meeting a friend for coffee – you may be able to help motivate each other!
- Try scheduling your days in an agenda. Having allocated hours for schoolwork and for socialising can help you ensure you're keeping a balance between the two.

Needing the stress to perform our best

Sometimes, we put off a task not because of anything negative, but because we know that we perform best under pressure. That “amped up” feeling when a deadline is nearing can help some people produce their best work.

→ **What to do**
When you break the task down into smaller chunks (see #1), give each one a reasonable time frame. You can get a lot done in just 15 minutes if there are no interruptions. It might be helpful to set a timer for each segment to help keep yourself focused.

“If you ever feel like you’re struggling and feel overloaded with deadlines that you can’t cope with, take a step back. Speak to your housemate, a close friend, or even contact your university’s wellbeing service for a bit of support. You are most definitely not alone, and I can assure you that so many people will be able to relate and will be very willing to help you out.”



[Student Minds Blogger](#)



Coursework and assignments

Writing your first university paper can feel intimidating. Coursework and assignments often follow a different format than you are used to in school and it can be hard to know where to start. The key to doing well on assignments is to understand what's expected, allow yourself enough time to properly research and write, and make sure you edit well.

Talk to your tutors about what is expected. Sometimes this information will be in the syllabus so make sure you check that first. Ask about length, type of content, grading scheme, and format. (Some papers have to be in specific formats – which have guidelines for how to reference the material you researched and more. You can often take a workshop on reference formats at your university's library. Information on the use of different formats is also available online.)

If you struggle with writing, schedule a meeting with your campus' writing/study centre. Most, if not all, universities will have one staffed with experts who can help you learn how to better plan your paper or assignment.

Assignment tips:



"It's often worth changing things up and exploring different places to work (coffee shops & the public library were my favourites). Working at home in the morning and then heading off to the library for the afternoon can also be a good way to avoid cabin fever!"

"Create a timetable that covers the whole week (Monday-Sunday) and fill in the times of when your lectures and seminars take place, from there you will be able to work out which pieces of reading, revision or coursework you need to prioritise on and complete first."

"Planning out your work and making a schedule can help you to feel more in control. Break down big tasks into small manageable steps and add one or two of these to your daily to do list, so that instead of worrying about having to write a whole essay, you know that you just need to spend an hour or two this morning writing a plan."

Exams

Your first on-campus exams might feel pretty stressful because they can be very different from the exams you had in school, with higher expectations and less support. The best way to deal with exam stress is to know your material well and give yourself enough time to study. Starting to study the night before is never a good idea but constant studying can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. You need to find your balance. Make sure you schedule time for studying and time for recharging. You don't want to burn yourself out before the exam! Just make sure you're getting a balance of both. Getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and exercising are also important. You'll absorb information better and faster if you're feeling your best.

Exams can also be a great opportunity to learn. After you receive your results, it's a good idea to spend time reviewing to see where you went wrong so you can do better next time. Many professors, and teaching assistants are willing to discuss your exam results with you afterwards. Just make sure that you have thoughtful questions to ask when you approach them and aren't just looking to vent. Venting is best saved for your friends, not your professors!

Exam tips:



"Exam season shouldn't force you into five weeks of solitude. Keep in contact with your friends and family, as they are your biggest support network."

"Speak to those who aren't stressed - those people on different courses to you with different exam dates, those perhaps who have none at all, these are the people who might be able to restore your calm and create a better atmosphere for your revision breaks!"

"Schedule in some time to get active. We all know exercise relieves stress. Plus, it lets your brain focus on something other than your module contents."

"It is essential to be organised to achieve exam success. However, it is important to be realistic whilst organising your revision plan. Some people may have a part-time job, sports practice, a doctor's appointment, or a friend's birthday. Your revision plan needs to fit around this."

Box Breathing

Box Breathing can help your heart rate return to normal, which helps you to relax.

Here's how you do it: If possible, sit and close your eyes. If not, just focus on your breathing.

1. Inhale your breath (preferably through your nose) for 4 seconds.
2. Hold your breath for 4 more seconds. You're not trying to deprive yourself of air; you're just giving the air a few seconds to fill your lungs.
3. Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds.
4. Pause for 4 seconds (without speaking) before breathing in again.

Repeat this process as many times as you can. Even 30 seconds of deep breathing will help you feel more relaxed and in control.



Check out this website for a nice way to do the box breathing exercise described above.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation can help to release tension that you may be holding in your body.

It's a quick, easy, and subtle way to calm yourself down.

1. While taking deep breaths, clench your right fist tightly for approximately 5 seconds.
2. Continuing to breathe deeply, slowly release your fist over the course of about 15 seconds while concentrating on the way your hand feels.
3. Repeat with your left hand.

Although not as easy to do in public, you can also do Progressive Muscle Relaxation with your whole body, starting with your toes and working your way up to your face, one section of your body at a time. This is a great technique to use if you're having trouble falling asleep.

Talking to Academic and Support Staff

There will be many times throughout your time at university when you need to speak to your lecturers or course staff. Knowing how to approach them in a professional way can help ensure that your concerns are heard and help you feel less stressed while doing so.



Things to consider:

- Schedule an appointment or visit during office hours. Showing up unexpectedly can often mean that you will not get the time you need.
- Address the person by their title and last name (e.g., Dr. Brown or Ms. Chu) unless they've specifically told you that it's okay to use their first name.
- Explain what class or program you're in, the issue about which you're emailing, and the request you're making to them.
- Thank the person for their time. Even if they haven't done anything for you (yet).
- If not in person then use proper email technique; no short hand or 'text speak'; give context, don't assume they will know who you are or what you are emailing about.

Students with learning disabilities

Having a learning disability is not about intelligence – many people with learning disabilities have an average or above average IQ. Learning disabilities affect how a person processes or applies information. If you have a learning disability, you're probably well aware that school can be challenging. The good news is that today's universities have programmes in place that can be of help to you.

If you have a learning disability, make sure you check out what resources exist on campus when you're making your decision about which institutions you will apply to and access those resources as soon as you register. You may also need to provide information about your disability to the office that has been designated to help you. Make sure you have all the reports, assessments and documentation required. It may also be a good idea to let your professor(s) or tutor(s) know that you have a learning disability.

I think I have a learning disability – now what?

Although learning disabilities may be diagnosed in primary school, sometimes they go undiagnosed and untreated for years. If you suspect you have a learning disability that is interfering with your ability to succeed at school, university or at work, **you should seek help** to determine what kind of evaluation may be required to establish the presence of a learning disability. Your university's Disability Office will be able to help you.

Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

Students who have a disability, including a long-term health condition, mental health condition, or specific learning difficulty, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia may be eligible for additional financial support to cover any extra study-related costs you incur. You can get the allowances on top of your other student finance and you won't need to repay DSAs. The amount you receive depends on your individual needs - not your household income.



Check out this link for more information and a helpful video.

Students with pre-existing health conditions

If you have a pre-existing health condition (physical or mental) that requires follow-up or ongoing care and you are moving to a new area to go to university, talk to your GP and \ or specialist about moving your health care. Make sure that you have this discussion with your GP and \ or specialist as soon as possible, after you have decided where you will be studying. Remember that it can take a few months to get this kind of referral in place. If possible speak to your new GP or specialist before you move and make an appointment to see them as soon as you arrive – even if you are currently well. It is much better that you begin this relationship when you are not in a crisis.



Take a look here for information on discussing and disclosing difficulties at university.

If you have been prescribed medication, bring enough of your medicines with you to tide you over until you have registered with your new GP and are able to get a new prescription. Be careful not to overmedicate yourself in times of stress or during exams. Also be aware that mixing medications with substances such as alcohol or drugs can lead to problems.

Students with ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that can affect academic success. People with ADHD have difficulty sustaining attention and can be hyperactive, easily distracted, disorganised and impulsive. They also have a number of challenges with what are called “executive functions” – such as planning and organisation. ADHD affects about 3-5% of the population. Approximately 30% of people diagnosed with ADHD also have a learning disability.

Symptoms of ADHD include:

- feeling restless or fidgety
- talking a lot and interrupting
- inability to focus or prioritise
- finding it hard to sustain attention
- forgetfulness
- impulsivity - saying or doing things without thinking

Just because you experience one or more of these symptoms, it doesn't mean you're definitely affected by ADHD. If you have previously been diagnosed with ADHD or if you think you might have ADHD, visit your GP or university health centre to discuss your concerns. With the right combination of learning strategies and medication, most people with ADHD are able to succeed and thrive at university.



For more information on learning difficulties, visit [British Dyslexia Association](#).



For more information on ADHD, visit [YoungMinds](#).

Self-advocacy

If you have ADHD, a learning disability or a pre-existing medical condition, here are a few things you may want to do:

- Register with the disabilities services office; they may be able to help you with learning strategies and set up helpful accommodations for your classes.
- Tell your academic advisor, professor, or tutor about your disability so they can help make the best academic plan for you.
- Find out about tutoring services available on campus.
- Take medications as prescribed and make sure that a doctor is monitoring your medication use.
- Keep important paperwork, such as your course schedule, student loans, and scholarships in a folder and store it in a safe place.
- Educate yourself. Understand what it means for you to have your condition and how it's likely to impact your life.
- Study difficult material when your energy level is at its peak and take frequent short breaks.
- Write down assignments, exams, meetings, and 'to do' lists in an agenda, instead of trying to remember everything in your head.
- Sit at the front of the classroom to minimise distractions.

Building resilience

Things in life don't always go your way. Nobody lives a life that's completely stress-free – nor should they expect to or even want to. Negative emotions like sadness, anxiety, grief or disappointment are normal and have an important job to do – they help us to focus our attention on something important and make adjustments to improve our wellbeing. This is called adaptation or building resilience.

Resilience to academic failure

Getting your first paper or exam back can sometimes be a shock. The expectations in university level courses are often much higher than those in school and doing well often requires much more effort. Even people who were straight-A students in school can be in for a surprise. It can take some time to become comfortable with this new reality. You should not take this reality as a negative outcome. On the contrary, it is likely a more realistic evaluation of where you sit in a much larger group of people. Use this experience as a challenge to learn more and improve your skills. Doing poorly on a paper or exam doesn't mean you're a failure as a person.

It means that the academic techniques you are using need to be fine-tuned and maybe changed. Almost everyone has had a “wake-up call” at some point - use this experience as yours. Figure out what you did wrong and learn from it. You may not have understood the lecturer’s expectations before – now you do. Or maybe you actually didn’t study enough/work hard enough – it happens. Now you have a better understanding of what’s required to succeed in the course. Maybe your writing or study skills could use some improvement – visit the academic skills centre on your campus for additional help. Early failures can pave the way for future success, but you need to use them as a springboard for self-improvement.

Tips for becoming more academically resilient:



- Think about what you have experienced and use this to plan for a better result in the future.
- What do you think could have been done differently and how can this be applied to other situations?
- Humour helps. A positive attitude helps you to see humour in stressful situations. Instead of getting angry or frustrated, laugh it off.
- Accept that the world does not necessarily need to change to accommodate to you. Sometimes you need to change how you are dealing with it.
- Be realistic. Put things into perspective and don’t sweat the small stuff. Not every stressor is the end of the world. Indeed, most promote growth.
- Ask yourself if you’ll remember this moment in two years’ time. Most likely the answer is – NO.
- Take action when you need to. Instead of feeling helpless, get out there and find solutions. If something is wrong, speak up. Be polite about it, but speak up.
- Relationships matter. Having a good support network provides a buffer for stress. Take time to nurture yours - friendships take time and effort but are worth it.
- Trust yourself and trust in your work ethic. Hard work often leads to good results. It’s not how smart you are but how you work that usually counts most.
- If you need help, seek it out. Go when you first realise that you need help.
Don’t wait until there is a crisis.