

Learning at University

Making the transition to university brings a number of challenges, one of which is adapting to the learning demands and expectations that can differ from your previous experiences. This guide looks at what ‘learning’ actually means in a university context and offers strategies to help you adapt to your new environment.

Introduction

Congratulations! Now that you have successfully obtained a place at the University of Adelaide, you will need to enrol in your program, select your courses, and get started...

While starting university can be a lot of fun, it may take some time for you to transition to your new environment. The learning styles and strategies that may have worked in a highly structured environment, such as at high school or a workplace, are not always appropriate for higher education.

Transitioning to university

When transitioning to university, you are moving into a new ‘culture’. Students experience the transition to university differently and this is true whether you are an Australian school-leaver, a mature-age or international student. You will face unfamiliar places and people, and plenty of ‘independence’.

The transition process involves:

- Choosing a program and courses to study
- Adapting to teaching and learning styles
- Engaging with coordinators, lecturers, tutors and other students
- Balancing social and academic responsibilities

It is important for you to realise that university is not just about learning the facts necessary for a profession. It is also about developing a way of seeking information, sharing information, and working with others that will enable you to continue to learn, long after your graduation.

Learning at university

The term ‘learning’ is one that we can all define; to fit new information around what we already know and hopefully create ‘meaning’ and ‘understanding’. However, students may interpret the meaning differently. Which statement on the diagram on the following page best represents what learning means to you...?



Adapted from Buckridge (2006 in Turner, Ireland, Krenus, & Pointon, 2008, pp.2-4)

With reference to the diagram above, 'learning' does not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone. It is important to note that how you perceive learning may determine the strategies and techniques that you prefer to take. Therefore, by examining your beliefs about learning, you may be able to change your learning style if a task requires a different approach (Turner et al., 2008, p.2).

Dependent vs independent learners

In general, a common term that you will hear at university is 'independent learner'. For some students this can be a worrying prospect, especially if you interpret it as meaning that you must do everything alone and without any support. On the contrary, an independent learner is someone who maximises every learning opportunity.

An independent learner is self-reliant and in control of their own learning, which amongst other things involves being responsible for issues of time management, being actively engaging in tutorial sessions, and showing evidence of critical thinking in assignments.

As an independent learner, you will recognise that learning is not an activity to be done in isolation, but that successful learning involves your peers in the learning process. Through debate with others in more formal settings e.g. tutorials, or in less formal settings e.g. study groups, you will be able to present, explain, challenge and perhaps modify your position or that of others. This means, that it will be necessary to discuss your work and receive feedback, from either academic staff or other students.

Acting on feedback is an important way to monitor your progress. Such feedback does not necessarily have to be post-assignment (summative feedback), it can be during the process of assignment preparation (formative feedback). An independent learner recognises the value of assessment tasks, over and above the marks/grades they receive.

The following table distinguishes between the characteristics of 'dependent' and 'independent' learners:

<i>Dependent 'reactive' learner</i>	<i>Independent 'proactive' learner</i>
Requires the university to set the agenda	Provides much more of their own structure
Needs/wants to be told what to do all the time	Takes ownership of and responsibility for their own learning
Expects rewards/punishments	Offers constructive feedback to help initiate improvements
Assumes learning equates to presence in class	Recognises that learning involves more than mere presence
Blames their poor performance on the system or others	Works on strategies to improve their future performance
Expects that they will be helped without having to ask	Involves others at all stages and not just for problem areas

Adapted from Wallace, Schirato, & Bright, 1999, p.39.

Other types of learner

Research has shown that there are many different types of learner, including 'dependent' and 'independent' learners described above. An Australian study by Biggs (1994) identified three main types.

(1) Surface learner

This type of learner only wants to pass their course and focuses on surface-level meaning. This involves a minimum amount of study-related activity and is usually done at the last minute. This learning strategy often uses rote-memorisation and the reproduction of ideas from sources without any critical thinking.

(2) Achievement-focused learner

This type of learner has good marks/grades as their primary focus. Consequently, they pay close attention to the exact nature of the task and work out what the lecturer is looking for. This learner ensures that they do the suggested readings, from which they take careful notes. Additionally, they are mindful of their time management and often draw upon others to help in their learning.

(3) Deep learner

This type of learner enjoys learning for learning's sake with motivation that moves beyond achieving good marks/grades. A deep learner uses an analytical approach to examine how ideas and information are organised. Such a learner looks for meaning in content and makes connections between prior understanding and new ideas.

Different courses may call for different types of learning, so you need to be prepared to adapt your learning strategies. However, if you fit under the category of 'surface learner' or 'achievement-focused learner', then you might not be maximising the learning opportunities available to you at university.

References

- Biggs, J. (1994). Student learning, research and theory: Where do we currently stand? In Gibbs, G. (ed.), 1994, *Improving student learning: Theory and practice*. The Oxford Centre for Staff Development, Oxford, pp.1–19.
- Turner, K., Ireland, L., Krenus, B., & Pointon, L. (2008). *Essential academic skills*, OUP: South Melbourne.
- Wallace, A., Schirato, T., & Bright, P. (1999). *Beginning university: Thinking, researching and writing for success*, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Useful resources

Academic Learning and Language (ALL)

ALL provides academic development services and resources for local, international, undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students enrolled at the University of Adelaide. ALL offers practical advice and strategies for students to master reading, writing, note-taking, time management, oral presentation skills, referencing techniques and exam preparation for success at university.

For information on seminars, workshops and individual consultations check the following websites:

- Home page: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/>
- Writing Centre: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/writingctr/>
- Semester Seminar Series: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/seminars/>
- Learning Guides: http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/learning_guides/

Alternatively, contact clpd@adelaide.edu.au or phone 8303 5771.

Counselling Service

Transitioning to university can be a stressful period, even for those who are prepared for the challenge. If stress becomes overwhelming, there are a number of strategies you can explore. The Counselling Service runs workshops on stress management and relaxation. They can be contacted on 8303 5663.

Other useful resources

<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/new/>

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/management/external/els/information sheets.php>

<http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/help/starting>

If you require more assistance with Learning at University, please contact Academic Learning and Language on 8303 5771.

Visit the ALL website for additional resources: www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/

Principal Authors: Richard Warner & Donna Velliariis 2009