

Study methods in the UK

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Introduction

This guidance note is in two sections. The first, "Teaching and Learning in the UK", is intended to give you an introduction to the different teaching and assessment methods used in UK institutions (colleges and universities). It also gives some information about attitudes to study in the UK. The second, "Study Skills Tips" introduces some ideas on how to approach your own studies.

There are a great number of different courses and institutions in the UK. The teaching methods used and the skills you need will vary, depending on the subject you study and the institution you attend.

Teaching and learning in the UK

Lectures

These are large classes, usually lasting around one hour, where a lecturer (or tutor) talks about a subject and the students take notes. On some courses there can be over a hundred students in a lecture. There is usually little or no opportunity to ask questions during the lecture. Lectures are usually intended to:

- guide you through the course material by explaining the main points of a topic
- introduce new topics for further study or debate
- give the most up-to-date information that may not be included in textbooks

Seminars

These are smaller classes where students and a tutor discuss a topic. Seminars often last longer than lectures. You will know in advance what the topic is, and the tutor will usually ask some students to prepare a short presentation for discussion. Seminars are usually intended to encourage debate about an issue. Both the tutor and students can express their opinions and may even disagree on certain points. This type of debate is actively encouraged. The aim is not for students to be told the "correct" answer, but to understand the different arguments and make judgements about their merits. This process helps you learn to analyse a topic critically.

Tutorials

These are meetings between a tutor and an individual student or small group of students. Tutorials are usually intended to give you more focussed guidance on:

- a piece of work you are doing
- a piece of work you have already completed
- give a problem you may be having with a topic or with study methods

Practical Work

On many courses you will have practical workshops, for example, laboratories on science courses, performance classes in music or drama, a mock trial on a law course. On some courses (for example, geography) you may go on field trips away from the institution. You may work individually but more usually you will be part of a group. Practical classes are usually intended to give you practical experience of the theories you learn in other classes and to develop practical skills.

Workplace training

On some courses you will have training in a working environment, under the supervision of experienced staff (for example, working in a hospital on a nursing or medicine course). Other courses offer "sandwich" placements - an opportunity to spend time away from classes working in employment related to your course of study.

Independent study

On any course you will be expected to do some independent study. This usually involves working on your own (or sometimes in a small group with other students) to research a topic and produce written work, or make a presentation at a seminar. This is an integral part of UK academic culture. Independent study is intended to:

- help you develop skills such as critical analysis and problem-solving
- help you develop your research skills (for example, finding relevant books and articles)
- allow you to investigate a topic in more detail and develop your own ideas

Written work

You will almost certainly be asked to produce written work, usually through independent study. Written work may include:

- essays
- a project or a dissertation (a long essay based on extensive independent research, data collection or experimentation)
- assignment questions (for example, a series of mathematical problems)

Written work is often assessed. This may be to monitor your progress and identify areas for improvement or it may contribute to your overall mark or grade for the course.

Other projects and assignments

On some courses you may also be asked to produce work in other forms. For example, you may be asked to write a computer programme, prepare a poster presentation about a topic, or prepare practical work for evaluation.

Group work

You may be asked to undertake a piece of work jointly with other students, which may either lead to joint or separate assessment. Group work is designed to encourage team-working skills. If your group includes students from different countries, you may find you have different views and expectations about how work will be shared and decisions made. Group work can be a good way of learning about working in a multi-cultural environment.

Examinations and assessments

UK institutions use many different forms of assessment, including:

- "closed" examinations, where you are not allowed to refer to books or notes and have a specific time to complete a certain number of questions
- "open" examinations, where you can refer to books and notes and may even be able to take the question paper away and return it by a certain time
- assessed essays, individual projects and dissertations
- group work projects
- portfolios (a collection of work)
- presentations to a seminar
- a display or performance of work (for example, an art show or music performance)
- practical assessments (for example, in laboratories or on hospital wards)

Some courses are "continuously assessed", meaning that instead of examinations at the end of the year, your progress is assessed and marked throughout the year.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work as your own. If you present the words or ideas of an author or another student without acknowledging the source, you could be accused of plagiarism. Whenever you use a quotation from a book, or reproduce an author's ideas (even in your own words), you should indicate the source. This process is known as referencing. You may find the accepted ways of quoting and referencing work in the UK are different from those you are used to. Penalties for

plagiarism, especially in assessed work and examinations, can be very severe, and may include failing the course. Most academic departments have a preferred style of referencing. Check with your tutor about how you should reference your work: don't rely on the advice of other students/friends.

Seeking help

Lecturers and tutors will normally be available to provide help and advice on a very limited basis outside timetabled classes. You should try to ask your questions during tutorials or if the lecturer invites questions in lectures or seminars, use that time. You may be able to see staff during their "office hour", a designated time during the week when they are available to see students. Outside these times staff are likely to be very busy.

Study Tips

The information below is a general introduction to ideas you can use to help you study effectively. Most institutions will be able to provide you with more detailed guidance.

UK academic culture

It may take some time for you to adjust to studying in the UK. Academic culture and expectations vary according to the subject, the level of study and the type of institution. However, there are some general trends that you may notice in the UK:

- Students often work independently, studying on their own for significant periods of time.
- Students are expected to develop critical judgement, which means an ability to assess whether an argument is coherent and well supported by evidence.
- Learning large amounts of factual data is important in some subject areas, but in many cases a critical approach is considered more important.

Many UK students will also be going through the process of learning the conventions of academic life. Study skills classes may help you understand what is required. Your tutors should also be able to guide you as to how to approach your work.

Know what is required

It is important to know what you need to do to fulfil the course requirements. By finding out the answers to some of the following questions, you may be able to plan your work and how to use your time effectively:

- when writing an essay or assignment, how long should it be?
- is a piece of work assessed, or is it for "practice"?
- what proportion of your marks does a piece of work or examination represent?
- how much work will you have to do, and at what stage in the course?

Much of this information may be included in a course handbook: this will be a useful reference throughout the course.

Lecture notes

When you attend lectures, you will need to take notes.
Remember:

- you don't need to write down everything the lecturer says: concentrate on the main points and important details
- most lecturers use asides (stories to illustrate a point), examples and even jokes. You don't need to write all of these down.
- abbreviations and symbols for common words and terms can help you write faster, but use ones that you will understand later
- if there is something you don't understand, make a note to ask after the lecture or in a tutorial
- keep your notes in order in a file. Most students "write up" their notes neatly after a lecture
- don't just file the notes away until your exams. Read through them regularly: this will help with revision
- if you want to record a lecture on tape, ask the lecturer's permission first

Don't worry if you find it difficult to understand the lecturer. This will get easier as you get used to their style and, if you are not a native speaker, as your English improves.

Seminars

Seminars can be intimidating if you are not used to this kind of teaching. Don't worry. Many other students feel the same at first. Participating actively in seminars is an important part of the learning process, so try to contribute, even if it seems difficult at first. It is best to do some reading before each seminar, so that you are familiar with the topic and can follow and contribute to the discussion. It may help you to make notes before the seminar of any points you would like to make. If you are having difficulty in seminars, discuss this with your tutor.

Reading

On most courses you will be given a book list. You will not usually be expected to buy or even read every book and journal article on the list. Items on a book list may contain:

- essential, basic reading or reference material for the course
- an overview of the subject
- background information
- useful information for a specific topic or piece of work

Check with your tutor and other students in later years of the course which books are essential for you to buy. Most books will be available in your institution's library but essential titles ("core" texts) may be difficult to borrow because everyone on the course needs them. You may be able to reduce the cost of buying books by:

- buying second hand editions (from students in later stages of the course, or from a second hand bookshop) – but make sure you buy an up-to-date version
- forming a group with other students on the course, each buying some of the books and sharing them

When you start to read a book or article, it can be useful to scan through the contents page, chapter headings and introductory sentences. This will help you understand the structure and ideas that will be discussed. You can then read in detail. It is usually best to take notes as you read, starting with the title, author and any other reference information (for example, date, publisher). Try to avoid copying out large sections from the text. Make a note of the main points and summarise arguments in your own words if possible. If you copy out a section of the text, put it in "quotation marks" so that you know to reference it if you use it in your work. The contents page and index are useful for locating specific information.

Sources of advice and help

If you have a question or problem with your studies your tutors will usually be happy to advise you, or put you in touch with other sources of help. It is best to seek advice early, rather than wait for a problem to become critical. Most institutions give advice and information about study skills. Some institutions run specific classes or workshops. If your institution provides English language support classes, there may be sessions on English for academic purposes to help you, for example, on writing essays in English. If you are attending other English language classes your tutors there may be able to offer advice. Even if your English is good, you may find that, like UK students, you can benefit from help with your study skills, as you adjust to your new place of study.

Telephone numbers

If you are calling from outside the UK, do not dial the (0) in the telephone numbers above. For example, if you want to call UKCISA from outside the UK, dial +44 20 7107 9922. If you are in the UK, do not dial +44, but do start the number with 0. For example, if you call UKCISA from within the UK, dial 020 7107 9922.

Textphone numbers are only for those who use a textphone (minicom) because of difficulties with speech or hearing.

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