Managing online study

Opportunities and challenges of studying online

Online study is becoming increasingly popular, and is an effective way for many to be able to gain a university degree. Online study offers greater flexibility, convenience and independence in managing your study and can be very rewarding. However, to be successful, four key skillsets are required. These are the ability:

- to master the on-line technology
- to be a self-motivated, independent learner
- to manage your time effectively
- to collaborate with others to share common challenges and learning experiences.

Accessing the technology

Prior to your first classes, ensure you have a reliable computer, recent versions of Word and Excel, a reliable broadband connection, and a headset with microphone for participating in lectures and discussions.

Blackboard is the software used by the University to manage all aspects of your study. It is the same software used by on-campus students but some features are used more frequently by online students. These include the ability:

- to listen to and watch lectures live or at a time to suit your circumstances by using the Blackboard Collaborate feature
- to interact live online with your lecturer and other students by using the Blackboard IM feature
- to share files by using File Exchange
- to post questions to other students or your lecturer by using Discussion Boards.

As soon as you receive your username and password, go into the University's website (MySCU). Once in MySCU, click on the 'MySCU Hub' link in the top right of the screen. From here, there are several areas to explore, but two areas are particularly important – 'Learning and Information Sites' and 'Services'

Learning and Information Sites: click on 'Learning and Information Sites', then click on each of your units listed under My Learning Sites. Explore the contents of the menu items on the left hand side of the screen to locate Unit Information Guides, Study Guide and other learning resources such as myReadings (online course-related texts). Also identify the place where you Submit Assignments. In particular, you should practice connecting to Blackboard Collaborate for each of your units. This is where lectures will be presented and recorded. To access this area, you will be asked to download Java software. To do this, just follow the online prompts.

Services: click on 'Services' and explore the range of services available there. In particular, check out the Library Services area and the Learning Support area (be sure to click on the Academic Skills area to check out the range of Quick Guides to help you in your studies). If you have any problems with the site, the IT support contact details are also available in this area under Technology Services.

Start to familiarise yourself with both these areas of MySCU to streamline your entry into external study.

Academic Skills Quick Guide

What is in this guide
- Opportunities and challenges of studying online
- Accessing the technology
- Becoming a self-motivated, independent learner
- Effective time management
- Collaborative learning
- Related Quick Guides

Becoming a self-motivated, independent learner

Not surprisingly, highly motivated students are most likely to succeed. Thus, it is important to consider the goals that led you to study at university and use these to maintain your motivation.

University education aims to develop independent learners, and this is particularly important for online students. This does not mean you cannot ask questions or collaborate with others in the learning process: it means you have sufficient knowledge of the course requirements, familiarity with educational technologies and your own learning processes to manage your study effectively. It also means you have self-management skills such as how to manage your time.

Effective time management

Some hints for online students:

- do not underestimate how much time you need to devote to online study - each unit requires 10 to 12 hours per week (including lectures, study and preparing for and working on assignments)
- avoid getting overwhelmed. Stick to the weekly timetable of topics. Do not read too far ahead in your Study Guide, nor get too far behind
- have a conversation with family and friends to set expectations around your availability – just because you do not go to campus does not mean you have not taken on a significant commitment
- prepare a session planner and a detailed weekly planner. Modify them until they really work for you (see Managing your time Quick Guide).

Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning is increasingly used in university education because it reflects trends in the workplace made possible by technology. Recent research (Salmon, 2011) shows that online students are particularly advantaged by this approach. Examples include:

- small group projects that encourage students to work together using wikis (online areas where users can share and edit documents)
- Discussion Boards where online discussions can be held and all members can contribute
- interactive online conferences held using one particular feature of the Blackboard software, Blackboard IM.

Use Blackboard to connect with fellow students. If you have a question, you might find advice posted on the Discussion Board by other students or your lecturer. This sense of being part of a group can make online study easier and more enjoyable.

Stay in touch by checking your emails and Discussion Boards every day. Remember that the University is a professional environment and all communications should be respectful and appropriate.

A final piece of advice is to always ask for help. This can be done by email to your lecturer or your School's student adviser, or through the Group Discussion Board. As part of your preparation for study, create a list of your key contact people so you will readily know how to access help if you need it. Good luck with your studies.

Related Quick Guides

To find the Quick Guides listed below, go to myServices > Learning Support > Academic Skills and then choose Quick Guides from the menu on the left hand side of the screen.

Tips on Getting Started at University, What's in a Unit Information Guide?, Managing Your Time

Reference

Salmon, G. (2011). *E-moderation: The key to online teaching and learning* (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Routledge.