



STUDY SKILLS FOR ART, DESIGN & MEDIA STUDENTS

Stewart Mann

Study Skills for Art, Design and Media Students

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Study Skills for Art, Design and Media Students

Stewart Mann

University of Hertfordshire



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Dedication

Above all, many thanks to my past and present students, colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire, professional friends, and family who have supported me in the preparation of this book.

Foreword

‘What university gave me was a desire to learn, a creative mind in problem solving, an ability to talk well about my work and to work well with others, along with a good degree to get my foot in the door.’

Graduate student

My experience of teaching practical and academic aspects of art, design and media, and supporting students in their studies, has demonstrated to me that students come to higher education with many skills. They have creativity, enthusiasm, curiosity and practical skills, but also uncertainty. They may not be sure how to organise a complex project or write an essay, how to prepare for a ‘crit’ of their work and how to use criticism in the development of their learning. This book brings together a discussion of the wide range of activities that you, the student, must undertake and the skills that are required to be successful at college and university, and in working in the creative and cultural industries.

For a rewarding career in higher education, take control of your learning by using this book and the experience of students and staff who have contributed to it.

Stewart Mann

How to use this book

Why this book?

This book focuses on study skills for art, design and media students. It provides a means to develop your skills across a range of areas that will provide benefit and support during your studies in higher education but also into your career ahead. It draws on students' experiences before university, as they tackle projects at the beginning of their studies through to preparing for a degree show, and on to a career and the workplace. It provides an introduction to key areas such as creative and critical thinking; practical and academic projects and how to develop and manage them; and how these are assessed. The technology and processes of specialist media are developing continually, but these core skills will help you to adapt to and maintain what is required to live and work in the changing world of the arts, design and media.

For you – the student

The book is divided into parts and chapters that discuss:

- preparation for study in higher education;
- what to expect at interview and when you start university;
- how to tackle day-to-day studies, practical and academic project work;
- how to understand the project brief;
- working in the studio;
- improving your research;
- reading and essay writing skills.

The book will:

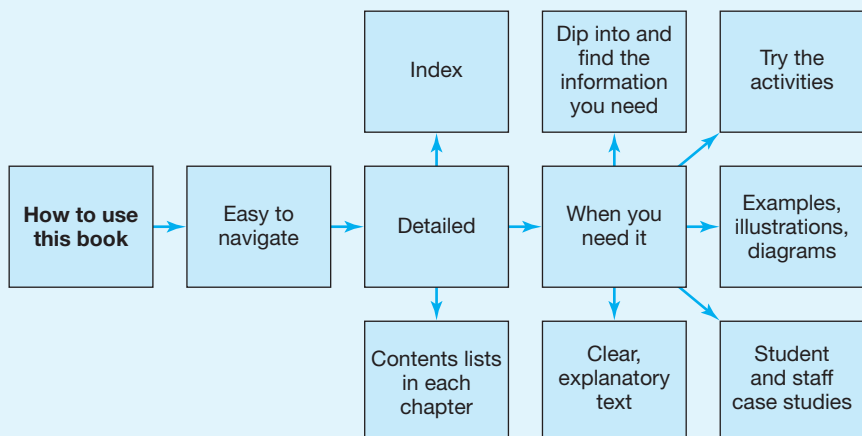
- help you to reflect on your skills, take ownership of your learning and decide what skills you need to develop;
- introduce ways of approaching your art, design and media work as a creative and critical professional;
- provide an introduction to critical, cultural and contextual studies, with the key ideas, writers and theories explained and illustrated;
- discuss ideas, theories, concepts and student experience of specialist media;

- describe the assessment process and help you to prepare your work for it;
- discuss ways to help you to prepare for the workplace and your career.

It will encourage you to develop these skills, reflect upon your abilities and plan your learning to meet your personal aims. You can use the diagrams, charts and tables to demonstrate your organisational abilities and improve your grades as you present your work.

For you – the tutor

Higher education programmes demand much of our students, creativity, technical skills, organisation, academic writing ... As lecturers we have subject-based teaching at a demanding level in practice and in theory, but also many of our students are uncertain as to how to study at degree level. Do we teach study skills and if so, how much? This book is designed to cover the important aspects of study at degree level, both practical and academic. It provides an introductory primer of how to analyze and contextualise visual and media artefacts, explains theoretical and critical concepts and models for analysis using examples related to visual and media culture, and introduces aspects of practice and education applied to specialist media. It is written on the basis that all students will gain confidence in their abilities by using this book to further all aspects of their studies.



Finding the information you need

One way to prepare for university is to read the opening sections of this book to gain an understanding of what you can expect and what will be expected of you. The book is designed to be accessible and to help you to find the information you need quickly and easily.

There is a contents list and a comprehensive index to help you locate specific information, but each chapter also has an introduction describing its content, plus a brief summary of the chapter's contents. You will find numbered section headings, explanatory text, diagrams and check-lists. Examples highlight key issues and worked examples, case studies allow students and staff to talk about their experiences, and if you want to try the activities you can put into practice ideas and techniques for your ongoing project work and assignments.

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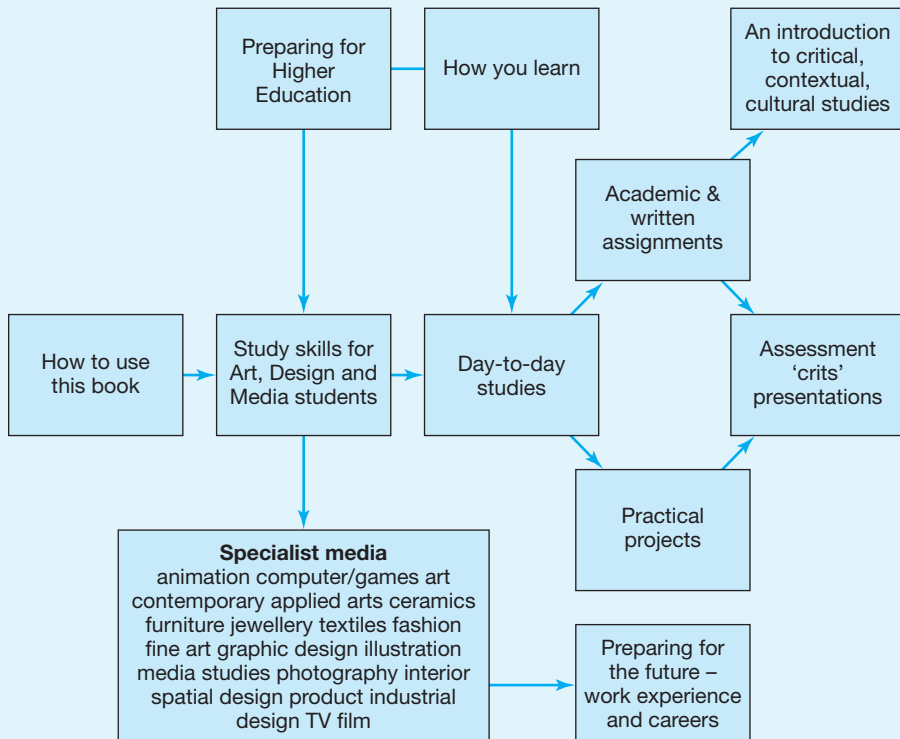
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1 Preparing for Higher Education

There are many things to be considered when making an application to your chosen degree course. You will have spent time selecting a university, carefully assembling your portfolio, attending an interview, considering finance and where you will live.

You have now been accepted. Congratulations!
What do you need to do and what will happen next?

Within this first part of the book you will find discussions on making a university application, the differences in approach compared with school and college, learning requirements and disabilities, joining instructions, arriving and orientation, the organisation of your studies and contact with staff. As part of your preparation for degree study there is a series of activities designed to help you to reflect upon your skills and identify where you feel you work well, as well as those areas where you need to gain experience. This idea of you reflecting upon your skills and taking control of your learning is an important part of the philosophy of Higher Education.



1 Before university – application and arrival

Students going into Higher Education come from a variety of backgrounds: they may be straight from school, from National Diploma courses and Foundation Studies in Art and Design at further education colleges, have worked for a period and wish to change career paths, have spent time undertaking child care, be retired and wish to pursue a particular interest or ambition, or from overseas and wish to gain experience of studying in the United Kingdom. They will be of different ages, backgrounds, experience, motivation and personal goals, and will be studying either full or part time.

In this chapter you will cover:

1. what to expect in higher education and how to prepare for it;
2. arriving at university – orientation and induction;
3. the university year and week;
4. communication with staff;
5. learning difficulties and disability.

USING THIS CHAPTER			
If you want to dip into this chapter	Page	If you want to try the activities	Page
3 What to expect – differences between school or college and university	6	1.1 What you need to take with you	8
4 Your aspirations	7	1.2 Key staff – contact details	16
7 Students with disabilities and learning difficulties	9		
9 Induction and orientation sessions	11		
12 Communication – staff and you	14		

1 Application for higher education

You will have had a period of preparation and a decision to make on application to your chosen degree course and university. For some students the decision is based in part upon a need, or wish, to stay in their home area or to leave home for the first time. They will have visited possible universities offering courses in their chosen subject area, formed impressions about suitability, researched reputations, completed UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) application forms, prepared portfolios and been for interviews. Where students cannot visit in person, most universities offer virtual tours on their websites that give an impression of the site.

Figure 1.1 shows you all the aspects involved in your decision to go to university.

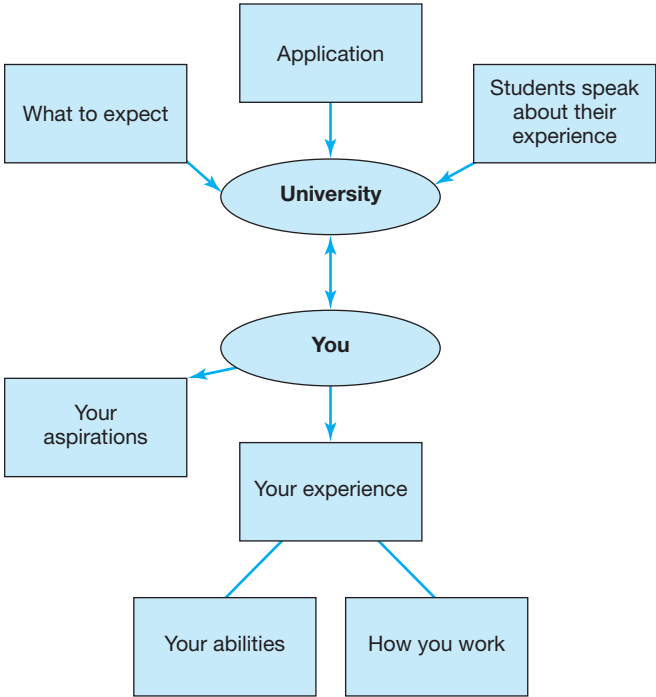


Figure 1.1 An overview of your university experience

Student Experiences:

What I did before higher education

‘At school I did A level Art, Drama and English, and then I went on to a Foundation Course in Art and Design. Initially my interest was in illustration, followed by fine art, but I decided on Fashion.’

'Following sixth form I worked for a year as a technician on gaming machines to help finance my education. I did A levels in Art and Design, Photography, English Language and Maths.'

'I did art at school but never saw it as more than a hobby. When the children were at school I did painting and drawing classes but for only two hours per week, but followed on with a part-time Foundation Course and decided to go on, having enjoyed it. On reading the syllabus and visiting for the open day I considered fine art, but there the emphasis seemed towards sculpture, video, photography ... and I did not want to do that. Applied Arts had the things I wanted to do. I would call myself a "hands-on" practical person and I like to make things.'

'I worked in Berlin on an unpaid placement in theatre on props and make-up and was supporting myself through stacking shelves in a supermarket, cleaning and working in an art gallery. I decided I needed to study and develop my interests and applied to study in England. I sent slides and an essay and was accepted. I was not able to visit the university, but the virtual tour allowed me to view the facilities.'

'I did an HND (Higher National Diploma) before I came here and so I did have many of the skills that were needed for the course, but the way of thinking and the emphasis were different. I entered the second year and I had quite a lot to get used to, and I did not feel ready to deal with some of the demands. Buildings, staff, people and ways of working are different between different colleges or universities and it does take time to get used to. Others in your year have had a year to get used to it.'

Student Experiences:

My decision and interview

'I visited the university on an open day and 'liked the vibe' – the tutors were friendly and I liked the student entertainment areas. I was interviewed by one member of staff and it was not as nerve-racking as I had thought it would be. They looked at my work and asked how I approached it and my other interests. I do have a real interest in design as it is in the family.'

'I came to interview and it was less formal than I had expected and I brought a portfolio of my work and this included 3D work. My teacher encouraged us to do things that were different and did not make us sit down and draw all the time. I had made a life-size figure by casting a friend of mine and also large foam sculptures of ordinary objects such as a toothbrush.'

'There is a very diverse range of experience of students and the first year is about bridging these gaps. I am taking marketing as well as this adds to the possibilities after university. I have a small child and I am finding the costs high.'

2 Before joining

Some students will have visited the university of their choice during degree graduation shows (this is a good time to visit as you can view students' work and it can give you an insight into what you can aspire to), open days or at interview. Talk to students if you can and you will find they are willing to give the inside story on their experiences.

At interview, make sure you are aware of the nature of the programme you wish to join and think about questions you can ask staff when you are with them. From this you can build up knowledge of the course ethos and how it is run.

3 What to expect – differences between school or college and university

There are many aspects involved in your arrival at university, as shown in Figure 1.2. What differences should you expect between this and school?

- There will be more people.
- Students will come from a wide age range – from teens to 70+ – different national, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, and some will be living away from home for the first time.
- Students will have different interests, aspirations and expectations.
- Generally there will be large campuses.

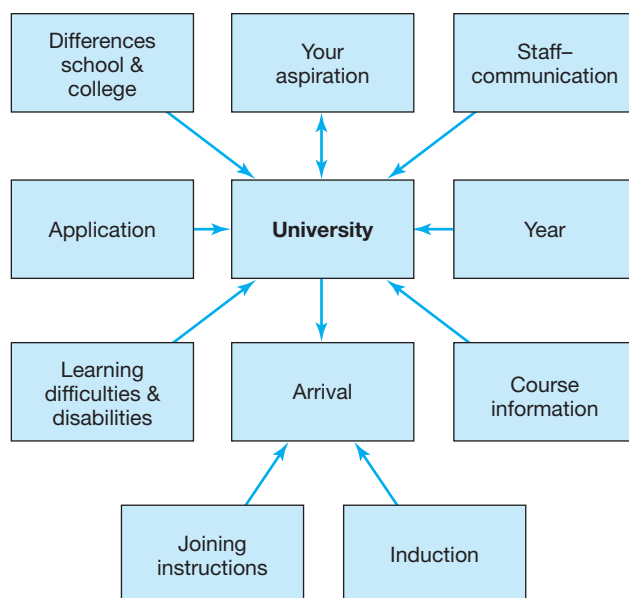


Figure 1.2 Things to consider before and on arrival at university

- You will get less individual attention.
- You will see less of your lecturers.
- You will encounter different teaching styles and methods – e-learning and distance learning.
- There will be contact with visiting lecturers and representatives from industry.
- You will frequently work with other students, at varying times and in different groups.
- You will work with other students independently and support each other.
- You will be expected to organise your time and take responsibility for and manage your own learning.

4 Your aspirations

From the beginning it is worthwhile considering your aspirations and expectations. Reflect upon your abilities and skills so that when you enter higher education you will have considered your strengths and weaknesses and will be able to build upon your experiences and achievements.

Ask yourself: who is the real you?

- How would you describe yourself?
- What do I do well?
- What do I find difficult?
- What do I need to do?

Be self-critical, but not negative.

(See Chapter 2 *How you learn* p. 17.)

5 Joining instructions

Once you have accepted a place at university you will receive joining instructions, which you must read carefully. These will include a list of documents you will need to take with you, including:

- a means of identification;
- copies of correspondence;
- evidence of your qualifications;
- details of accommodation in halls, on and off campus, and what you will need to bring with you (for instance, is linen supplied or are cooking utensils provided?);
- advice on dates for joining and details of support services, such as medical facilities (if you have special needs you should inform the university to enable them to make any necessary arrangements);

Chapter 1 Before university – application and arrival

- details of student support, such as counselling and financial advice;
- information on the course you will be attending.

There will be additional information for overseas students, which will include advice on travel, visa requirements and aspects of what to expect when living in the UK.

Talk to the university of your choice if you need to apply for funding through the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) before you arrive as this will speed things up so that support is ready when you start your course.

(See Students with disabilities and learning difficulties, p. 9.)

6 Course information

The course information you will receive from your chosen university is designed to provide you with an indication of what you will need in order to get off to a good start. Read it carefully. It will advise you on the following:

- equipment or materials that you might purchase before joining. If there is a particular specification, make sure you follow it as there may be an issue of compatibility with systems such as software used at the university;
- equipment or materials to purchase on arrival, when there may be discounts available through the university. If you are unsure, wait and talk to your tutors so that you get the most appropriate equipment for your course, and perhaps for your future professional life;
- whether you need to bring any of your work;
- a project to undertake before you join the university – this may have the purpose of providing material to work with at the beginning of your course.

ACTIVITY 1.1 What you need to take with you

You will require documents, specialist equipment and perhaps examples of project work when you join your university course. A checklist may prove helpful to ensure you have what you need.

Checklist –
Documents

Equipment	Have already	Need to purchase
Project		
Previous work		

7 Students with disabilities and learning difficulties

The system for support for students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia is based upon the Disabled Students Allowances, which are directed at individual needs and centred on the student. The UCAS application form provides an opportunity to declare any disability or learning difficulty and universities will have a Disability Support Officer who should be contacted initially. They can advise you on the nature of support and can organise support around your study needs.

Funding is through the DSA and has to be applied for by the student, who will need to provide evidence of the nature of their disability or specific learning difficulty. For example, with dyslexia there is a requirement for a recent educational psychologist's report followed by a needs assessment on what is required to support learning, such as dyslexia software and one-to-one specialist study support. This can take time, so it is advisable to initiate the process by making an application some time before the academic year starts and the support can then be in place when you join the university.

Within further education the funds are directed to the college, with the college providing support directly, whilst within higher education the funding is allocated to the individual student.

Example

DISABILITY SUPPORT

‘When a student with a disability is accepted on one of our degrees we invite them as early as possible to discuss their needs. We have made arrangements to support students, such as a Fine Art sculpture student who was visually impaired, a Graphic Design student with Asperger’s syndrome, a photography student who uses a wheelchair, and there are a significant number of students with dyslexia within the art school. The disabilities are varied and we make an agreement with them as individuals as to the nature of study support needed. It is important that they contact us as soon as possible so that we can advise them on making an application for the Disabled Students’ Allowances.’

Disability Support Officer

8 Arriving at university

You may be arriving from overseas or from another part of the UK, or alternatively travelling from home, but early on things will tend to be confusing for you and other students who are joining. Remember, however, the university staff will endeavour to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. Certain registration processes may be available online and you should use these if possible.

At some universities first-year students are scheduled to arrive one week ahead of returning students, which gives staff an opportunity to concentrate on helping new arrivals to settle in.

Student Experiences:

At first I was homesick

‘At first I was very homesick and missed home, but now I live in a flat on campus. My flatmates and I get on very well and are moving to a house next year. We knew a little about each other at the beginning because we were informed by the accommodation people at the university as to who we would be living with and we set up contact through Facebook before we arrived.’

9 Induction and orientation sessions

There will be university-wide orientation sessions, such as how to find central services, and details of freshers' weeks, which feature social events and the array of societies run by students through the Students Union.

You will need to consider what you wish to engage with at this stage. Your academic work will be of primary importance, but there are other aspects of university life that can be both rewarding and career enhancing. Most Art, Design and Media students will have initial and developing skills that can be applied in many contexts. It is worthwhile considering your long-term goals and how you can give your CV that something extra, such as volunteering within the community, working on publicity for a society or the Students' Union, sports activities or extending your work experience and earning money to help you support yourself.

Think carefully and be selective.

You will be issued with an *identity card* and you will be expected to carry it with you – it may be required to gain access to facilities, as a form of credit card for university purchases and as the means for you to register your attendance. Keep it safe as you are likely to be charged for a replacement. You will also be issued with a university email address and this will be used to communicate with you at a personal level.

There will be *student guides and handbooks*, which detail important information about your studies and the university. These will cover a wide range of issues, from details of your responsibilities, including a code of conduct for students, to assessment information such as handing in coursework, the grounds for asking for an extension to a deadline and how examination boards are conducted. There will also be health and safety issues and information on how to access counselling services. Keep these guides, refer to them, you may need them later.

Course induction

Your school or faculty will also have specific induction sessions, usually organised by the teaching team. These will include tours of facilities, meeting key staff, undertaking group orientation projects and meeting fellow students. You will be at a disadvantage if you miss any of these sessions as it will be assumed that you have received this information. If you do miss them for any reason you will be dependent upon your fellow students to fill you in on what has happened and you will need to ask staff for any hand-outs, such as student guides, for future reference.

There will be some waiting for things to happen, but all new students will be in the same position, and staff will endeavour to make you as welcome as possible.

Student Experiences:

The first project

‘When I arrived I was quite nervous, but we were put into groups of four for a project, which was to illustrate what we had done through the summer. We included various things that we had done, like jobs and holidays, and then finished with the university logo. We had to present it to the whole year and five tutors and there was a vote for the top three.’

‘I was attracted to studying in England because the teaching approach seems much more relaxed. The induction programme was great fun and helped us to get to know each other. As I was from overseas I had felt nervous, but this got me talking to people. We were divided into groups and had to work together to build a tower out of wine gums and spaghetti (it was dry), designed to be as tall as possible but to support a specific weight. We also had to design packaging for eggs so that they would not break when thrown and the staff had to catch them!

I joined the Students Union and the clubs and this also allowed me to meet people from different parts of the university. I also work as a student ambassador, which means I show people around the University on Open Days, and this helps with my expenses.’

10 How degree courses are organised – credit-based systems

Degree study in most universities is delivered at levels four (first year full-time study), five (second year full-time study), and six (third year full-time study). Part-time study requires the same study time but is spread over a longer period. For each unit or module of study that a student completes successfully, credit is awarded at the appropriate level. The system generally employed in the UK is based upon the successful completion of 120 credits per level of study over an academic year for an honours degree or 90 credits for an unclassified degree.

Study content is divided into self-contained modules of 10, 15 (single modules) or 30 credits (double module). If the work for the module achieves a pass grade, the total credit is awarded independent of the level of the grade. If the module is failed then no credit is awarded. A student builds up credit of the required level to achieve a given full degree, including successful completion of all levels. Once the study is complete, a formula based on the pass grades will be used to arrive at the degree classification – for example, high grades will result in a second- or first-class honours degree, with lower grades resulting in a third-class honours or an unclassified

degree. If for any reason a student has completed only part of a degree programme, a Certificate (level four) or Diploma (level four and five) of Higher Education can be awarded.

11 The university year and week

The university year is divided into terms – autumn, spring and summer – and most universities organise their academic year around two semesters, with modules of study running for one or two semesters.

During a typical university week you will be expected to work on your academic studies from 35–40 hours per week. Teaching time in contact with lecturing staff will vary according to the subject and the stage you are at in your course. This may vary from 5 hours up to around 20 hours per week. Many programmes provide more teaching time at the early stages as students settle in and less as students become increasingly independent in their study.

A 15-credit *practical module* might typically be divided into:

- 5 hours – lecture (briefing, contextualising lectures);
- 1 hour – seminar /tutorial (progress and feedback tutorials);
- 10 hours – workshop/practical instruction;
- 134 hours – independent study (including research, design development and making in the workshop).

Total 150 hours of study time.

As this illustrates, there is a significant amount of time available to you to use as you wish, so you need to organise yourself and manage your time.

There will be practical sessions featuring the following:

- **briefing sessions** – most important so that you know what you have to do, these help you to gain understanding of the language and meaning behind the project brief;
- **studio sessions** – at certain times you may be expected to be in a studio space and staff may be there to discuss what you are doing as you work or to give technical help if you need it;
- **workshop induction/instruction** – these may be obligatory to teach you how to use equipment and processes safely;
- **critiques** – these give you feedback on the work you have done.

There will be lectures:

- size from 25–300 people;
- varying from 1–2 hours;
- some requiring attendance, some being optional.

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There will be seminars:

- size 10–30 people;
- varying from 1–2 hours;
- requiring preparation and involving discussion.

There will be tutorials:

- individual and small group;
- varying from minutes to an hour at the most;
- to discuss your progress on an individual project or essay, or to give feedback on completed work.

Make full use of everything available to you. If you do not attend sessions, it will be you who loses out.

Registration will be required on a weekly basis to prove you are at the university and to note your attendance at individual teaching sessions. You will be expected to work independently at times and this may be in the studio or learning resources centre (LRC) or library, at home or away from the university. Apart from scheduled sessions you will be expected to organise your time to get the work done and to meet deadlines.

12 Communication – staff and you

How will lecturing and administration staff communicate with you?

- By noticeboard.
- By intranet – this will provide a means of access to your course information, study guides, access to the LRC and emails using your university email address.
- By letter – usually when it is important that you are informed of something. Make sure you let the administration know of any changes to your address or telephone numbers so that you can be reached if required.

How will you contact staff? Administrative staff offices will have scheduled hours of opening and for many enquiries they will be able to help you:

- by email to individual lecturing staff;
- by telephone – but remember, staff are not always in their offices as they have a wide range of duties, both on and off campus. To be sure of seeing lecturing staff you may need to make an appointment.

Example

STAFF YOU WILL MEET

You will come into contact with the following:

- **Programme/degree course leader:** would normally be full time and would have responsibility for the organisation, content, delivery and assessment of your degree.
- **Administrative staff:** have a wide variety of duties, such as reception, maintaining student records, preparing assessment information for examination boards, university finance and acting as a liaison between students and staff or university services. Normally, administrative offices are open during office hours and may well be the first point of contact when you need information, help or to report your absence due to sickness.
- **Lecturing staff/tutors:** depending on the number of students there will be further contracted staff who may have a proportional post, for example 0.5, 0.75 up to a full-time post. They will have responsibility for particular aspects of the course, such as a subject area and/or a year group, or to perform the role of personal tutor. These staff will be available on a regular basis and can be expected to have detailed knowledge of the programme and university procedures. They will also have various duties that they undertake during university vacations.
- **Visiting lecturers:** are contracted on a temporary basis that may be for a few hours for a specific session, or teaching a whole semester, which may total approximately 3–9 hours a week. They tend to have specialist expertise and work in industry at other times. They will have been trained to undertake their academic duties but may not have detailed knowledge of wider university procedures.
- **Module leaders:** are responsible for the organisation, teaching, assessment and student progress within individual modules.
- **Technical staff:** provide technical support and are usually responsible for workshops, darkrooms, print rooms and other facilities and have detailed experience of particular media. They are usually employed on a full-time basis.
- **Study support staff:** will be qualified to support students in a number of ways in areas such as developing skills in English (for students with English as a second language), academic writing skills and working with students who have disabilities.
- **Senior staff:** may have various titles, such as head of department or school, dean, pro vice chancellor, vice chancellor, and have responsibility for the running of the various units and developing the policies for the university. A vice chancellor will have responsibility for the whole university. Students do not generally come into contact with these staff on a day-to-day basis unless they become involved in the committee structure for the school or student forums which address issues of student concern, at which some of these staff may be present. In addition, there will be senior staff who chair examination boards which have responsibility for the conduct of assessment and there will be a published process of communication if they need to be contacted.