PART ONE

SETTING OUT

Part One is all about getting ready for your journey through academia, with mental preparations and practical tasks to help set you up for the ride of your life.

In this section, we offer twelve activities to do before you arrive, and in those early days at university. We've chosen them carefully because they're important things to get sorted if you are to start as you mean to go on. You might not feel that you need to complete them all, but read each one carefully and give it some time and thought.

ACTIVITY 1.1

THE TOURIST VERSUS THE BACKPACKER – STARTING WITH THE RIGHT MINDSET

How do you intend to conduct this once-in-a-lifetime trip?

Let's consider two distinct approaches:

1 **The Tourist.** Tourists are passive. Tourists hang out by the pool or pass by the sights of the city on an open-top bus. The tourist's default position is to wait for attention: wait until the tour guide sends the plan for the day, and expect the resort staff to bring that cold drink.

2 **The Backpacker.** Backpackers are active participants in the journeys they take. It means they're working harder than tourists – carrying their packs, travelling on foot, relishing the unfamiliar. They're nimble adventurers, curious and self-sufficient. The backpacker's default position is to seek. They find rich experiences. They do stuff.

Choosing the way of the backpacker will help you to immerse yourself in your uni experience, and give you rewards that can't be underestimated. Your teachers will be expecting proactive students who act as partners in learning. By taking on this identity before you set out, you'll travel with a sense of agency and responsibility as you fully explore the exciting opportunities around you.

TASK

The way you define yourself – tourist or backpacker – will determine how you respond to changing circumstances. Consider the following scenarios and reflect on how you would act in each. In your notebook, draw out a simple scale like this one:

And remember, these are all scenarios that will absolutely happen at some point!

Scenario – a lecturer delivers a compelling exploration of their topic, moving quickly through some big, unfamiliar ideas, leaving you slightly confused.

The Tourist	The Backpacker
Keeps their head down, doesn't make eye-contact and prays they don't get asked a question. Waits for someone to notice they're struggling and offer additional help and attention. Complains about the staff to their friends afterwards. Tries to put it out of their mind. Makes a private decision to skip the lecture next time that teacher is delivering.	Asks an open question at the end of the presentation, looking for clarity. Waits behind to ask for a reading recommendation. Checks-in with another student, curious to see if they understood the topic a little better. Spends half an hour in the library afterwards, researching some of the key terms discussed. Accesses the presentation on the VLE afterwards to go over it again.

Think about what kind of learner you have been: the old you. Where would you put that person on the scale? Where would you like your new you to be going forward? And finally, where could the best you aspire to be?

Reflect on these questions and make your three marks – for old you, new you and best you – on the scale in your notebook.

Now do the same for the next two scenarios.

Scenario – you get feedback for an assessed piece of work and your mark is unexpectedly low.

The Tourist	The Backpacker
Dismisses it as an error on the part of the marker – 'They just don't get me!' Tries to explain it away or minimise it – 'I was tired/ hungover/ill.' 'I missed a key lecture.' 'I don't care, it wasn't a big proportion of the marks for the semester.' Is so wounded by the experience that they are stunned into inactivity. Puts it out of their minds, deletes or hides the feedback and gets on with the next thing.	Asks for more feedback about where they went wrong. Takes it seriously, but not as a personal attack. Makes an honest assessment of their levels of effort and engagement, and adjusts accordingly. Makes a plan to improve, perhaps even to resubmit the work.

Scenario – a lecturer advertises an interesting extracurricular activity – perhaps a competition, a study trip or the opportunity to take part in a research project.

The Tourist	The Backpacker
Considers the possible disruption to their comfort. Thinks about the extra work which might disturb their life of ease. Imagines the hassle associated with filling out the application form, getting travel insurance or attending an extra meeting or two. Wonders why it's worth bothering, since it doesn't have any impact on their final grade. Can't understand why anyone would volunteer to do 'extra work'.	Investigates further, curious to see if it might be for them. Thinks about the new people they might meet along the way. Imagines the new experiences which might emerge, and the learning opportunities that come with them. Persuades a friend to join them to find out more, asks around to see if others have done it, or energises a group to take part. Develops a stronger connection to their community.

The closer to the backpacker end of the scale you can get, the more you'll enjoy university, meet interesting people and have exciting things happen in your life. It's that important.

RESEARCH CORNER – MAKE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS PART OF YOUR IDENTITY

Whenever elections come around in democratically run countries, a proportion of people who are eligible to do so don't vote. There are many reasons for this. They may feel their vote will make no difference, or they may be ignorant of what different political parties offer and feel they lack the expertise to make a choice.

Attempts are often made to encourage greater voter participation. In one interesting study, the aim was to increase a person's likelihood of voting by changing the language they used to describe themselves (Bryan et al., 2011). Some were asked to think of themselves as 'a voter', as if the process of voting were part of their identity. It's just who they are. Others were asked to commit to an action – to go and vote.

Which group was more likely to take part in the process? Well, 95.5% of those who were asked to think of themselves as voters went to the ballot box. And of those who were urged to complete an action – to go and vote – 81.8% turned out (Bryan et al., 2011, p. 12654). That's a significant difference.

You can see this effect all around you. If you regularly refer to yourself as 'a runner', you're much more likely to lace up your trainers and hit the road. If you think of yourself as 'a healthy eater', you're less likely to expend mental energy considering that huge slice of cake. If you mentally label yourself 'a team player', you're much more likely to cooperate with others or join a study group.

You can use these findings to your advantage. If you want to change your behaviour, start by changing the way you describe yourself. You're a backpacker, not a tourist!

ACTIVITY 1.2

THE PACKING LIST – CONSIDERING THE CULTURE YOU'RE LEAVING BEHIND

Do you remember what it was like to move from primary school to high school, or from education to employment? At some point, you will have had to make a big adjustment from one work culture to another.

In his book *Hell Yeah or No*, Derek Sivers (2020) writes about how to manage personal change. He offers the idea that just as a fish doesn't know that it is in water, because that is its only experience of the world, people are so fully immersed in the culture that surrounds them, they can't easily see beyond it (Sivers, 2020, p. 23). When you first start university, it's the same thing. You will have been a part of your previous working environment and you'll have got used to it. You know what the values are, how they play out and what people expect of you.

Sivers recommends taking small actions that start you on a path to changing your self-perception. In this exercise, we ask you to reflect on the culture in your previous environment, to think about how it shaped you, what your behaviours were like and what you want to leave behind.

TASK

We suggest you take two small steps towards your new working culture.

Step 1 – open your notebook and scribble down some reflections on your most recent working culture. Be as honest as you can, then think about what you can learn:

1 In your previous learning culture, did you usually feel stretched and challenged to do your best work?

2 Did you sometimes feel uncomfortably stretched? (If so, that is usual for many learners.)

3 Did you challenge yourself to do better or rely on others to motivate you?

4 Did you make the best possible use of your work time?

5 How focused were you on your tasks? Were you ever off-task or distracted?

6 What skills did you learn? What skills did you hope to learn, but didn't?

7 Did you feel enthusiasm for your work? Was this because of the culture or despite it?

8 What were your most helpful work habits, and how were you supported in these?

9 What were your least helpful habits, and why did they become habitual?

10 Did your peers raise your game or lower your standards?

11 Did you believe you could succeed in your work? Why, or why not?

12 Imagine you are going to spend an extra two years staying in the same place, doing the same things. How does that feel? What would be missing? Is it time for change?

Step 2 – summarise your thoughts from the above exercise by making a short packing list that will help you to take the right things with you on your university journey.

Among the students on your new course, there will be people who have very effective working habits, because they come from supportive learning cultures. There will be others who need to leave behind destructive, damaging or ineffective learning cultures. There will be those who come from backgrounds where learning just wasn't valued or understood, but who managed to secure their university place despite this.

Do any of these descriptions match you? What habits and characteristics will you take with you to university and what will you leave behind? Be honest with yourself and take time to reflect.

And, as one final reflection on your packing list, make sure you truly intend to leave those unhelpful things behind. Don't accidentally pack your procrastination – leave no space for stowaways!

PASSPORT STAMP – CONTROL YOUR BUDGET

Intention – have a budget and stick to it.

Action – if you've never had a monthly budget before, here's what to do. Ideally you should set up a spreadsheet or use an app built for student finance,[1] you could just make a table in a Word document or even write it down in the back of a notebook.

If you are starting from scratch, remember that the aim is to be aware of how much money you have available to spend each month (or week, if it's easier) and how much you will need to pay for your essentials. The amount you have left over is your disposable income.

Your *income* could be from a grant, loan, earnings, benefits or, if you are lucky, parental contributions or a scholarship.

Your *essential expenditure* will depend on what type of accommodation you have. If you're in halls, you'll have most of your bills covered. Once you're renting your own place, you'll be thinking about rent, as well as water and power bills. Remember that students are exempt from paying council tax. Wherever you're living, you'll need to set aside money for food, transport, phone, Wi-Fi, clothing, and contents insurance to cover your personal possessions (possibly paid yearly or termly). Depending on your course, you might need to budget for books, equipment and study visits. You'll probably also need to factor in a deposit of a few hundred pounds on your room/flat/house, which you'll get back at the end of the year, provided you have left it in a good state. We recall once losing a proportion of the deposit because the skirting boards hadn't been dusted, so watch out for this kind of nonsense from landlords and letting agents – leave it pristine! Check the inventory on the day you move in so that you can make it clear, in writing, if anything was broken, worn or damaged before you took over the tenancy.

So, just list all the amounts in two columns – incomings and outgoings – then add up the individual items and take your expenditure

1 For example, see: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/top-phone-apps-managing-student-finance.

away from your income. It's worth itemising things separately so you can easily go back and make adjustments if any of the costs change or you need to find ways to make savings.

Reflection – hopefully you're left with a positive number! Ideally this will be enough to cover your hobbies and social life. Don't be too surprised if this number is very small, or a minus. If you need to boost your income, consider what part-time work you could do. Sometimes paid work can be a real joy, so don't see this necessarily as a bad thing. Bar and restaurant jobs, for example, can be very sociable and you might get good tips, though the hours will be late so you shouldn't overstretch yourself by doing too many nights per week. Perhaps you can even get work in line with your academic or career interests, which will enhance your CV and be a good learning experience.

It's very important, and well within your capabilities, to get on top of financial matters from the start, so this doesn't become a source of anxiety. If in doubt over financial matters, your students' union may well offer guidance and help, but you can also try the ever-useful moneysavingexpert.com, which is independent and full of links and advice.

ACTIVITY 1.12

THE POINTS OF YOUR COMPASS – WHO'S WAITING TO HELP?

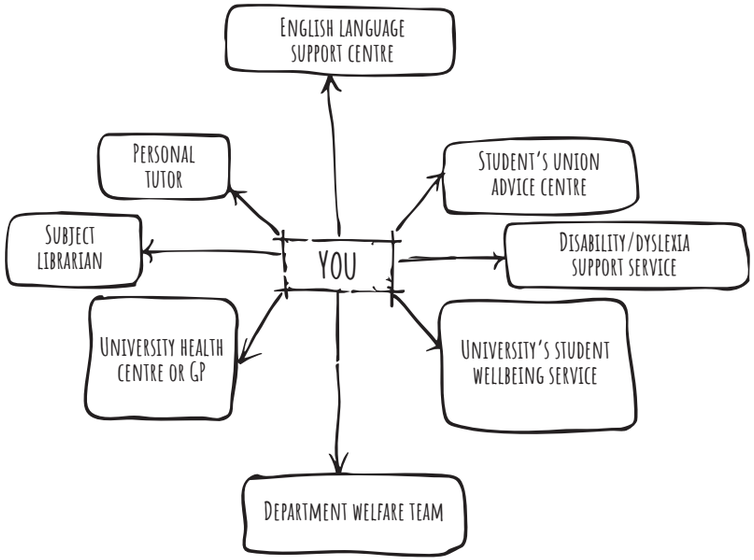
Remember, you are supported as a learner *and* as a person by many different professionals and services at your university. It is not unusual for a new student to feel lonely or overwhelmed. Your personal tutor will make you aware of some of these services, but it can't hurt to think about how to find any specific types of support you might need.

The diagram below shows an example of a student at the centre of a supportive web of contacts who are there to help them with all kinds of problems: academic, personal and financial. It helps to make a compass diagram like this at the start of your course, because we all experience rough seas at times and it's good to have done the forward planning and be ready to deal with that.

TASK

DRAW A COMPASS FOR WHEN YOU ARE FEELING ALL AT SEA

Using the example **on page xx** as a guide, draw the points of your personal compass. Place yourself at the centre and arrange around you all the people and services who you can go to for assistance or information. When we are floundering, we sometimes lack the clarity to find the right support or the impetus to ask for help. You could add the phone numbers, office locations or email addresses for each person, so that it's easy for you to make contact if you need to. All the people on the example compass are paid to help you – it is their job.



RESEARCH CORNER – THE IMPORTANCE OF ASKING FOR HELP

In 2019, academics from the University of Reading and Imperial College London published the results of an interesting study (Wong and Chiu, 2019).

They'd gathered together thirty students who were on course for the very best grades and interviewed each of them for ninety minutes. The students were asked about the same things: high school experiences, how university had been different, how they prepared for assessments, what feedback they'd been given, how they solved problems and, crucially, what advice they'd give to others.

These students were all on different courses – criminology, sociology, international relations, education – but their interview answers were surprisingly similar. What follows are extracts taken word-for-word from their advice to new students. The patterns are remarkable:

'They're lecturers, not mind readers … talk to the staff in your modules, really speak up.'

'I've learnt to let other people look at my work … [it] really helped.'

'If you need help, you need to go to the lecturer. They're not going to come find you if something is wrong with your essay … you have to up your game now.'

'Don't be afraid to talk to your lecturers. You know, always communicate with your lecturers, tell them if you don't understand something.'

'Go and bother your lecturers and ask them to see drafts.'

We might often imagine that students who are on track to get the best grades are the ones who aren't asking for help – that they can do it without assistance. But this study, and others, shows that there tends to be a positive correlation between asking for help and achievement – and also a positive link between asking for help and feeling part of a supportive community, which in turn boosts feelings of optimism and belonging.

It may be a little frightening, but it'll be worth it. Ask for help!

PART THREE

IN EMERGENCY BREAK SEAL

THE FIRST-TERM WOBBLE

'He felt that his whole life was some kind of dream and he sometimes wondered whose it was and whether they were enjoying it.'
(Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*)

Unfortunately, in the academic year ending 2024, around 41,000 undergraduate students dropped out of university (Jack, 2023). It's only one in 37, or roughly 3%, but this figure is on a steady upward trend.

If you're using the ideas in this guide, you should hopefully not be considering dropping out, but if you think that university might not be working for you, just pause for a minute and take a breath.

Most new students have a first-term wobble. They've freewheeled through the good times of the first few weeks, seen the sights and done lots of new stuff. After a while, though, they could start to feel a few doubts. They might be missing home and family. Or at least the dog. They

might start to feel worried about their own academic ability, or general direction in life, or money. It can feel lonely, like you are pedalling away on a long-distance path with nobody else around. Sometimes this leads to questioning whether you are on the right track at all.

If this might be you, this section is intended to help.

Think of this part of the book as the first aid kit that you carry with you throughout your adventure. Because, let's be honest, very few travellers get through a big expedition without incident. We focus here on study-related problems, but of course we know that these things are very often tangled up with all kinds of other difficulties that can be part of life. This book isn't big enough, and we don't have the expertise, to tackle all of those in depth, so don't forget that there are people all around you who want to help, as we showed you in **ACTIVITY 1.12** on page **XX**.

HOW DO I KNOW WHEN IT'S JUST A BUMP IN THE ROAD AND WHEN IT'S AN EMERGENCY?

Perspective will be important here. People have different reactions to risks and threats, and we would suggest that some difficulties are pretty normal occurrences for students and shouldn't leave you feeling overly concerned. As a very broad guide, for example, if:

- you miss a minor deadline by a couple of days
- you miss a few days of lectures due to illness, or
- you don't like the other people in your assessed work group

... then you've encountered a few bumps in the road. Put a sticking plaster over your minor cuts and bruises and carry on. These are the regular trials of any traveller – sometimes you're going to miss the bus, drop your guidebook in the river or get a common phrase badly wrong, like asking a Spanish speaker how many anuses they have (*¿Cuantos anos tiene?*) when you meant to ask how old they are (*¿Cuantos años tiene?*).

Don't punish yourself over these tiny hitches or blow them out of proportion. University is not about having a perfect academic record, so catch up on the work by watching lecture recordings, apologise to your teacher about the missed deadline, and grit your teeth and be nice to those troublesome colleagues in the assessed work group.

That said, you might encounter other difficulties which are less common and need swift attention.

The activities in this part of the book address problems that students do have now and again, which you'll need to attend to if they happen to you. We seriously suggest that you *don't* read this part in advance, in case you get the wrong impression. University is not a trip through uncharted wilderness, and you won't be beset by dragons, bears and sea monsters at every turn. Look at the contents page and see if any of the activities sound like they'd be helpful right now.

A NOTE ABOUT JOURNALING

One piece of advice when facing problems is that exploring your thoughts and feelings by writing them down in a personal journal can be very helpful. Many of the ideas in this book evolved from several years of journaling.

Writing about or drawing your feelings, ideas, plans and dilemmas can make them seem more self-contained and manageable. It can help you move towards objective detachment, which is helpful when reflecting and decision making. Or it can teach you more about yourself, which could support you in avoiding patterns of self-destructive behaviour.

An example of such behaviour is perfectionism. In our experience, this is a very common way in which students suffer: from the pain of 'failing' to meet the unrealistic standards that they have set for their own work. If you have been journaling, you can flick back through the last few weeks or months of your notes and seek patterns. Have you used language about yourself that seems negative? Are you critical of your own work and capabilities? Do you focus on relatively tiny aspects of your work or life?

We could give loads more examples, but the point here is that some of the problems we discuss in Part Three are the kinds of things that can be reduced or avoided by regular reflection, perhaps helped by a personal journal. And best of all, if you need to sit down and talk to someone about a problem, having journaled about it will help you to clarify what you have been experiencing and what you want to say.

ACTIVITY 3.8

WRONG WAY – WHEN YOUR FEEDBACK FEELS CRUSHING

We are reminded here of a trip to the USA where unfamiliar roadside signs on the freeway would simply state 'Wrong Way'. This actually means 'No Entry', but was amusing because of the sense of being told off by the big, red, block-caps road signs, with no further help offered, like what would be the better way?

When you first receive a disappointing mark and some critical feedback, it can feel like you're being told that you have done something very wrong indeed. Your tutor might have included some detailed, helpful feedback that could help put you back on track, but all you're seeing is the low mark and all you're hearing is WRONG WAY!

This is not unusual. From our own long experience of giving and receiving feedback, getting negative comments on your work can result in an uncomfortable trip through the following three emotional zones. It's best to acknowledge that this will happen to everyone. The aim of the following prompts is just to speed you on your way and remind you that these feelings are very typical.

ZONE 1 – HEART (HIGH EMOTION)

Journey time – anything from a few minutes or hours to a few days.

Journey stage – you have just received some very critical feedback, so you are responding entirely emotionally. You feel disheartened, angry, frustrated or humiliated. You might react as though you have been attacked by your teacher, rather than having had a piece of your work critiqued. You think:

- I hate them and they hate me!
- What do they know anyway?
- It's not fair; I worked so hard. This is an absolute disaster.
- I'm rubbish at this.
- I don't understand how/why this has happened!

In fact, of course, they do not hate you or indeed feel any emotion towards you. They are experts in their field so they know a lot more than you do. Nothing is ever fair (what gave you that idea?). You are here to learn, so if you are rubbish now you can look forward to being way better by the end of the course. All of this will pass, and surprisingly quickly. If you are wondering what went wrong, that's good, because thinking about this will sweep you along into the next zone …

ZONE 2 – HEAD (CONSIDERING WAYS FORWARD)

Journey time – two or three days.

Journey stage – you have got over the initial emotional reaction and cooled off. You know you need to form a rational and constructive response to the feedback. But you're still avoiding doing anything about it because part of you won't let go of the idea that you are not to blame for the negative outcome. You get together with your peers and question the task, dispute the marks and grumble about the phrasing of the written or verbal feedback you've received. This is resistance against taking action, and it feels uncomfortable. You think:

- They said give examples – and I did.
- They said I used poor technique – but I'm still learning this!

- They said I did insufficient research – but I spent hours on that!
- They said the essay was poorly referenced – does that really matter?
- They said the assignment was poorly structured – but it made total sense to me!

Now's the time to face the facts. Obviously, your examples were too few or not quite relevant, maybe both. Yes, you need improved technique, and that is what the feedback is intended to support. You either didn't spend enough time on research or it wasn't efficiently spent; perhaps you were using poor resources or researching superficially. Yes, accurate referencing matters very much. Look up the correct method on your uni's library website or VLE. If your work makes sense to you but not others, you need to take a step back and try to see it in a more detached way: leave it for a couple of weeks then look at it again with fresh eyes. You could ask a housemate or classmate to look at it for you or request some extra time with your teacher so they can talk you through any knotty problems.

Once you are doing this, you are already sailing over the border into Zone 3…

ZONE 3 – HANDS (GETTING DOWN TO WORK)

Journey time – anything from a week to a month or more, depending on the size of the task.

Journey stage – you are no longer quibbling about the assessment process and have decided to knuckle down and get on with it. Your actions will vary depending on whether the feedback was formative, and you have a final deadline looming, or whether it was summative, and you have just failed or barely scraped through a module. Whatever the situation, action is needed. For example:

- Make your own list of the weaknesses of the work – there might be more than the marker listed.
- Consult your study group or friends – ask to see their work if it was much better than yours.
- Either rework and resubmit (as needed) or make a reminder list of action points for next time.

- Be accepting of any element of sheer bad luck, such as illness – it happens.
- Move on to the next thing. When is your next opportunity to get some feedback? When you successfully cultivate this attitude, you have basically cracked the challenge of higher education!

You will probably find that your first-year grades do not count towards your final degree classification, but you might need to pass the year to proceed to year two. Your course handbook will likely be able to tell you.