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THE
STUDY
BOOK

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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About the author

Jonathan Hancock's fascination with study strategies began while he was still at school. The techniques he developed helped him to achieve top grades in all his exams, including a First from the University of Oxford and postgraduate qualifications in education from the University of Brighton and University College London. He has twice appeared in *Guinness World Records* for his remarkable feats of learning and, at the age of 22, he won the title of World Memory Champion.

Jonathan is a prolific author of books, courses and articles about thinking, learning and educational success. Following ten years as a teacher and school leader, he now advises universities on their teacher-training programmes, as well as working as a study-skills coach for a wide variety of organizations and clients. He is a Director of the Learning Skills Foundation, an advisory member of the *Learnus* think-tank, and the Founder of The Junior Memory Championship, through which he supports the achievement of teachers and students across the UK and Asia.

A former BBC presenter, Jonathan still appears regularly on radio and TV, writes a monthly column for *Reader's Digest* magazine, and has been the memory and learning consultant for all six series of the popular Channel 4 programme *Child Genius*.

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Introduction

Higher-level study is a serious challenge, but one that's well worth taking on – and this book will help you get the most out of it, every step of the way.

Beyond the pain barrier

Studying is hard – it has to be. It's a risky, confusing, gruelling, emotional, thrilling process of self-discovery and transformation. If you're not struggling with it, if it doesn't hurt sometimes, you're just not doing it right.

But – it shouldn't feel impossible. Energetic, but not frantic. In its toughest moments you should still know why you're putting yourself through it, where it's taking you – and what you've got to do to get there in good shape (even if that means going backwards for a while first). It's definitely not a straight path, and there are no easy answers – which is exactly why you're doing it.

When you choose higher-level study, you challenge yourself to think differently. It calls into question many of the things you thought you knew. It's like you're picking a fight with the learner you've been until now.

But on offer are fresh insights, priceless new skills, a different future. If you can stay well, hold your nerve and keep building your strength, the strain along the way will have been more than worth it.

I've written this book to help you – and, I hope, to inspire you. To show you why proper, grown-up study pushes you to the limit in just about every way imaginable, *and how that makes it pretty much the best thing you'll ever do.*

And if you're going to do it, put everything on the line like this, you might as well *give* it everything. This book is about embracing the challenge, taking on the fight, explaining all the strategies that got me through it in one piece, along with ideas and advice from students and academics who are grappling with it all right now.

I made a very good return on all the time, energy, money and raw emotion I put in to my own higher education. It was a love/hate relationship at times, but I'm so glad I

kept going. I'll know I'll always benefit from the investment I made.

I spend a lot of my time now helping other people get the most out of their study – to get properly involved in the struggle. It's hard work – that's the point of it – but there are so many ways to maximize your efforts and drive yourself to make the greatest gains.

Buckle up

I'll keep returning to the theme of battle (and being battle-*hardened* – it will be the making of you). For many students, it's a battle fought on several different fronts, with social, cultural, language or learning barriers to be overcome. As you'll see from the Contents, I also like the idea of study being a journey – which, in my own case, was more than a metaphor, taking me hundreds of miles from home to a town that was *very* different from the one I knew. Maybe you, too, have a real journey to make for the next stage of your studies. But even if you're able to do it from your kitchen table, you'll still need to be in the mood for some serious travel.

Higher-level study takes you to entirely new territory, where the ground is uncertain, the culture complicated, the population diverse. You'll need to get to grips with a new language, new behaviour rules, a new set of standards and values. Sometimes you'll be able to work with others; sometimes you'll be in fierce competition. You're going to have to change – and keep changing, in many different ways – if you're going to survive.

Some of the landscape has been mapped before, but there's still plenty to explore. So, do your research, navigate carefully, find ways to make new discoveries – and take others with you. You really can make your mark here, maybe even start a revolution.

But you should also embrace just being in these new surroundings, get everything you possibly can from the experience, and come back with your eyes opened and your mind expanded. You'll be a changed person because of what you've done while you were away.

Enjoy the ride

Like the adventurous journey (or the well-fought fight; or the long-distance run – that will be another recurring theme), it's the difficulty of higher-level study that makes it so exciting, so much fun – and, ultimately, so worthwhile. You need to see evidence

of your improvement and feel confident about the long-term benefits of your risk-taking. But I believe it's absolutely possible to revel in the struggle of studying. In fact, you have to, if you're going to stay committed for long enough to see real results and feel proper thrills. It's why you need to know how to study well: so that you put effort into the right things, get all the support that's on offer, and keep going long enough to enjoy everything else that makes student life so brilliant.

Love/hate

Studying at this level is meant to be emotional. There's so much to be excited about. You're choosing to do it. You have real independence. You pick a subject that interests you. You get the whole student lifestyle. And you do it all with *your* goals in mind.

On the other hand, the responsibility for success is yours now. You need to manage yourself through an increasingly complex range of tasks, making all the important decisions yourself, for years to come, adapting your approach to suit the needs of others, always having to do better to meet higher demands. *Your* ideas are questioned, *your* work held up to scrutiny. It's *you* that's really being tested here. And learning to handle the emotions of study is a big part of why you do it.

What it boils down to ...

... is this: how well you can learn to be a student, through the intense process of study.

That's the real test. By handling the workload, coping with the lifestyle, managing the emotions, wrestling with the ideas, getting better at it all over time, adapting, transforming ... you need to show that you can do your subject, and that you can do *studying*, really, really well.

Good study

This book is about everything you gain from good study – what you can *become* – and how it happens, in practice and over time: by doing more and more of the right things, all the way through your course.

There's no such thing as the perfect student. It's fine to make mistakes – especially if you learn from them – and it's important to be realistic about your development. This

book is full of ideas to try, but don't think you need to be doing all of them at every moment. Start in areas where you know you need help, then gradually extend yourself in other ways. Give new techniques time to work. Use the strategies here to enrich your studying and increase your confidence bit by bit, aiming high but always allowing yourself to be imperfect – to be *human*.

We're born as learners, but studying is something different. You've done lots of it by the time you get to this stage, but just doing it isn't enough. (You have to be careful: doing lots of anything can actually make you *worse* – like some delivery drivers with their road safety, and some doctors with their handwriting.) Good study involves a wide range of skills, used and developed in the process of your studies. This handbook will show you how, and get you doing it. I've designed it to join up with all the resources and support available to you *from* your course, because that's where it all has to happen.

I'll show you how to apply all the best study strategies to the specific challenges you face. Courses vary wildly, and a big part of your job is to understand what's special about yours: what you learn there and how you learn it. If you're studying maths, or film studies, or physiotherapy, you'll be doing lots of things very differently from your friends who've chosen French, law or acting (and even from people doing a course with exactly the same name somewhere else).

But there are some very important aspects of higher-level learning that apply to every course, everywhere. Those things are the absolute focus of his book. Get them right and everything else will fall into place.

A pinch of salt

Grab all the advice and guidance you can get – that's a big part of being a successful student – but take it all with a healthy dose of scepticism (another key study skill).

Here's the case for listening to me. I was a student who came across some strategies that worked well for exams and got me good grades, but more importantly got me interested in study itself. I glimpsed some exciting, ancient memory techniques and adapted them to help me develop and demonstrate my understanding. A couple of teachers showed me new ways of making notes and exploring ideas. I loved running and I applied some of those training methods to my studies, too. The more it all worked, the more I looked for other ways to help myself do well – and I've carried on doing it ever since. I've loved (and occasionally hated) struggling with coursework, presentations, dissertations, exams. I've gone from a comprehensive school in the

North East of England to Oxford University; channelled my skills into academic competitions; worked in primary schools, colleges and universities – and in publishing, radio and TV – to get as many people as possible excited about learning to learn.

I'm sold on the benefits of studying well. The qualifications are nice to have, and mine have helped me do some amazing things. But it's the academic and personal skills I've developed in the process that have driven everything I've done – and keep promising more.

Digging deep

Long-distance athletes often push themselves hardest towards the end of a training session. After they've put in the steady early miles and got to a point where they're starting to feel tired, rather than ending it there, they speed up. They 'dig deep', finding that extra something from somewhere, seizing the opportunity for intense, high-worth training in the last part of the run. They're still doing the same basic activity – running – but this version challenges them in new ways, and it asks different things of them, mentally and emotionally as well as physically. Like a student pushing on into higher-level work, they rely on all the work they've done before, and they have to trust themselves as they move out of their comfort zone. If they can embrace the difficulty, and make it transformational, they know that those tough later miles are where they'll find the most valuable opportunities for growth.

Moving in, moving on

The weekend before I started writing this book, I dropped my eldest son off at university to start his degree. It all happened quickly: he packed his bags, we loaded up the car – and suddenly he was leaving home, meeting new people, looking after himself, taking charge of his days, getting to grips with a completely new environment, starting to find out who he is when he's not with us and, among it all, facing an academic challenge that won't be like anything he's ever done before. What a challenge. What an *opportunity*.

Aim high

Higher-level study takes you to places where intense academic – and personal – development can happen. It's a challenge that can change the rest of your life.

This book will help you to hold your nerve, build your strength, and *use* your studies to become the student – the person – you deserve to be.

How to use this book

Use this book to prepare for or get started with higher-level studying – either by reading it from start to finish, or by dipping into particular sections – to build a strong, personalized approach.

Going up?

If you're interested in higher-level study (generally, the work done at the stage called 'higher education', in universities, colleges and conservatoires), then this book is for you.

You may be building up to it, taking courses that will qualify you for full-on higher studies (and these courses may already be stretching some of the skills you'll be using there). If that's the case, it's really useful for you to see what's on the horizon, and to start flexing some of the most important mental muscles so that you can begin developing the key academic skills. You'll boost your current efforts, and get yourself into great shape for when you do step up to the next level.

And if you're at that point now, about to start a course, in the middle of it, or even towards the end (and so probably squaring up to the toughest bits of all), then you'll find things here to help with every part of the challenge.

Welcome

Higher-level education is full of all sorts of people these days, and this handbook is designed for them all. It doesn't matter how old you are, where you come from, what your experiences have been like so far, where you hope to be going. I'm not assuming anything about you. But I'll get *you* to consider all these things and more, helping you to learn about yourself as a student and to see how *you* can get better and better at studying.

You're not alone

It's always useful to hear from fellow travellers, so I've included **Student Tips** from a

wide range of helpful contributors, all with down-to-earth advice from the front line. There are also **Case Studies**: carefully chosen examples that illustrate the ups and downs of study, the real-life experiences of some very different students – and the rich learning that can emerge from the struggles of study.

So, whoever you are, however you've got here, I've tried to make this book as approachable as possible. Where I mention 'university', I know that you may be studying in a different sort of institution, and I'm aware that terms like 'tutor' and 'lecture' and 'dissertation' don't apply to everyone. But the *reasons* for writing about them matter to everyone studying at a higher level. I'll show you what it all means for you, and how you can adapt all the details as necessary.

To be clear ...

Every chapter begins with a **one-sentence summary** to set up the central theme in the pages ahead.

That's followed by:

- **What?** – the chapter's content and concepts
- **When?** – the best times to put the ideas into action
- **Who?** – the other people involved in making them work
- **Why?** – the range of benefits on offer
- **How?** – the way you'll be guided through.

And all the chapters finish with a **Ten-point summary**, a round-up of the ten most important points to take away, and a brief **Where to next?** signpost to the chapter that follows.

Throughout the book I've included graphics to give you an extra angle on the information. With the words, I've gone for a simple style, hoping it helps you to interpret, understand and remember some far-from-simple ideas. Academic terms are explained – and academics themselves appear throughout to share their experiences and insights. These are the professionals, the people working hard to support your studies (and the folk you need to impress), so look out for these valuable pieces of **Academic Advice**.

But sometimes even high-level academic activities are best described in more down-to-earth ways. It's easy to feel like a complete beginner when things seem specialized and unfamiliar, but very often we're already doing them without realizing.

From an early age you've been analysing information, finding representations for abstract ideas, making complex arguments, exploiting the potency of language – and many of the most important academic skills are just extensions of behaviour like this. I want to give you the confidence to build on what you're already doing. You don't have to be fluent in the language to join in a very exciting conversation (but you will be, eventually, if you do).

Just do it

I want everything you explore here to have an impact, which will only happen if you get fully involved. **Note To Self** sections alert you when there's a particularly important action to implement, but on every page you'll see things to do, discuss, think about and try for yourself. The final chapter includes a practical plan for taking forward every key strategy explored in the book.

Good study is muscular and active. You'll get tired sometimes, but you can also *generate* energy by pushing yourself that bit further. The best learning comes when you're able to reach out and take all the things you need. Be prepared for plenty of activity (including the 19 different verbs that start the chapter descriptions in the Contents).

This is an interactive book that's designed to be kept alongside you throughout your work. You can read through it in order, carrying out the exercises and activities as you go. Or, you might feel the need to go straight to particular sections – elements of study you need most help with, or the things you're tackling *now*. Both approaches are fine. I've tried to make the structure and layout of the book as easy to get to grips with as possible, including a detailed **Contents**, **Part summaries**, an **Index** and **Go to** instructions throughout to help you navigate quickly and effectively. Sometimes I'll show you why you need to skip forwards or back to something, taking an integrated, layered approach. Sometimes you'll need to repeat an exercise or reassess yourself in the light of your real experiences. Remember, good study does not mean following a straight road.

But, as well as looking for the things you *know* you need, find time to read parts that might reveal aspects of your study that you didn't realize were an issue. Be honest with yourself: take a fresh look at what you're doing. It's all part of the reflective, self-aware, analytical approach that's at the heart of successful study. It's also what lets you mould all the advice into the shape that suits you best.

Ask Yourself sections will give you particular questions to reflect on – and advice on

how to get something tangible from your response.

I'll also be urging you throughout to put this book to work *within your real studies*. I've coordinated closely with leading universities to make sure that the advice here matches the messages they want to send out, and it's all aimed at helping you get the very best value from the course you're on.

So, apply what you read and learn to the things you're doing every day. Use it to help you get the most out of all the teaching and learning opportunities you get, including any support materials and services you're offered from elsewhere. Discuss it all with other students. Tell them what you've found most useful, and see what insights they've got, what works for them, where they think you should go next. Make this book part of real, dynamic development from the start.

Part 1 helps you to understand where you're starting *from*: how to use key aspects of your experiences so far to help you to plan where you want to go. You'll explore some important thoughts and feelings about learning, taking an honest and open look at the personal factors that could help or hinder your progress – and what to do about them. By analysing your unique situation as a student, you'll be able to take on the task ahead with your eyes open, ready to do the right things from the start.

Part 2 focuses on stepping up to higher-level study in general – and into the particular subject you've chosen. It's important to know which skills are developed here, how it's done, and what's that's likely to mean for you personally. Prepare yourself for the processes of teaching and learning that go on, choose your personal goals, and check that your external and internal environments are set up in your favour.

Part 3 covers things that matter to all higher-level students: getting everything done well in the time you've got; researching, reading and recording information effectively, in print and on screen; developing your writing to deepen and demonstrate your understanding; and making yourself 'assessment-proof' from day one.

Part 4 explores thinking, and the complex processes that control your understanding, learning and memory. It also gets you thinking about yourself, developing the sort of reflective approach you'll need to engage fully with studying, and keep doing it better.

Part 5 looks at all the things you have to get done as a student – why you do them, and how you get the most out them – including teaching, independent tasks, shared projects, presentations, large-scale writing tasks, tests and exams.

Part 6, finally, is about keeping going from here, committing to building all your skills in the long-term, in context; learning what good study *really* means.

I've aimed to include plenty of thinking space, and to give you freedom to do everything at your own pace, with your own needs firmly in mind.

But there's no getting away from the fact that study is so valuable *because* it tests and stretches you – and demands so much from you. It's not a book that offers easy ways out.

What this book is *not*

It's not a set of instructions to follow (but it will help you to discover what works best for you).

It's not a remedial guide, trying to fix things about your approach, or about you. You'll need to develop from where you are, building a rich set of skills over time.

It's not a course to take before the real work begins. When you activate this advice in your studies, this *is* the real work.

It's not a race towards a finish line. Part of its job is to show you why academic development isn't like that, because the most valuable skills are continually being developed and enriched. However, it will help you to achieve qualifications, which are clearly much more than just checkpoints along the way.

What this book *is*

It's a handbook for you to use actively, so that you find out in practice what good study means for you. And you can't just *want* to do it. You need a *will* to study. I'm committed to helping you access all the energy and enthusiasm you need to grapple with the challenges ahead, and I'll guide you to get the most out of everything you put in.

If you haven't felt it already, I hope you'll soon experience the excitement of study – an occupation that offers risk, struggle, highs and lows, life-changing experiences, and the richest of rewards.

Part 1

Starting Points

Assessing where you are now in your academic journey, to help you plan the way ahead

Chapter 1 focuses on *you*, analysing your **thoughts** and **feelings** about learning, your **experiences** of studying so far, and the **circumstances** you're in as you prepare for all the challenges to come.

Chapter 2 explores your **motivation** to study, your ability to control the **learning conditions**, and your confidence to use the full range of **thinking styles** at your disposal.

Chapter 3 examines sets of skills that are vital for all students: **self-management**, -**task-management**, **people skills**.

Chapter 4 explains the development of **academic thinking**, **behaviours** and **skills**, helping you to set yourself up for success.



Personal details

Make an honest assessment of everything about you that affects your studying, so that you can take charge of your academic development from today.

What?

This chapter guides you through a process of **self-analysis** that's absolutely vital for success in higher-level study. To tackle the intensely personal challenge involved in this phase of your education, and to seize all the opportunities it offers to develop as a person, you need to see yourself clearly throughout. And the first thing to examine is what you're like now, all the aspects of you that are likely to have an impact on your studies, so that you can respond accordingly. Because it isn't just about reflecting. It's about *reacting*, doing everything you can to give yourself the best chance of studying well.

When?

Self-reflection in its widest sense is absolutely integral to higher-level study. It features throughout this book as a key tool in the process of becoming a successful student, as well as one of the most valuable skills developed by studying like this.

The earlier you start, the better, and the questions asked in this chapter are particularly important to answer before you step up to full-on higher-level work. But don't worry if

you're already deep in your course. These exercises will help you to strengthen your approach at any point. The sooner you appreciate the full range of factors influencing your studying, the sooner you can set up the best possible conditions, draw on all your strengths, head off future problems, and get used to working in ways that are right for you.

Who?

Clearly, the most important person in this process is you – but others have significant roles to play, too. By talking to family, friends, fellow students and members of academic staff, you'll build up the richest possible picture of yourself – including pieces of the jigsaw that would be very hard to find on your own. You can also make these other people part of your responses to whatever you discover, harnessing their help at key moments and strengthening your ability to make studying collaborative and dynamic.

Why?

Good study is active and energetic. The exercises in this chapter will help you to reach out for what you need to be a success, and it's essential to have a clear sense of purpose (although you won't really know what you're taking on until you're in the thick of it). Higher-level learning is also an emotional business, requiring real strength of character, resilience, adaptability and a set of long-term survival skills. Self-analysis is a vital part of **planning** for the challenge and then **protecting** yourself throughout – ensuring that nothing gets in the way of your studying.

Ask the right questions and you'll reveal all the advantages you have, as well as any issues you need to address. You'll know what's likely to work, where problems could lie, the triggers to *use* as well as those to avoid. Crucially, you'll be alert to the signals that will tell you most about how it's all going.

You can't know everything about what's going to happen and how you're going to feel, and that should actually be a big part of why you're doing it. But you can make some sensible preparations, based on everything you know about yourself now.

How?

There are three strands to the process, and they all overlap.

Thoughts and feelings. First, look at yourself. Examine your opinions and beliefs about learning, consider what motivates you and what causes you concern, and reflect on how your emotional responses affect your study, thinking in particular about the things that *make* you react the way you do. You're looking for ways to harness your emotional energy and put yourself in the best possible place for higher-level learning.

Experiences. Next, examine your past to understand more about your approach to studying now. Mine it for clues about what the future might hold, but focus on finding ways to improve your outcomes.

Circumstances. Finally, make a broad sweep of your present position, exploring anything and everything that affects your study. The things in your favour will be exploited for all they're worth. Where potential threats emerge, you'll work out ways to minimize their impact or remove them altogether.

You'll be guided to get extra evidence for your investigations, and urged to be as honest with yourself as possible. Nothing here is black or white. Many factors have the potential to help or hinder. The things you find easy may offer less than you think. Threats and difficulties can add dynamism and richness to your work. Like your studies themselves, the grey areas are very often where the good stuff happens.

Within each of these three focus areas you'll be working through the '4Rs':

Reflect. Give yourself time and space to think openly about who you are, how you operate, and why. Consider pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses, and what it all means for your studies.

Reframe. See whether it helps to look at some of these things in a new way, emphasizing different aspects and viewing them in a more positive light.

Respond. Choose how you're going to use everything at your disposal, and deal with anything that threatens your success.

Resolve. Larger resolutions will emerge from the first three of the 4Rs as you clarify your understanding of what you're going to need to succeed. You'll know the areas to *stay* focused on from here, and the sort of committed, long-term approach that's likely to help you most.



Steps To Success

1 Take your pulse

Higher-level study is about *you* – which, for most people, means a mixture of excitement and fear, especially just before it starts.

You'll get to take control of so much of the learning process, make lots of your own decisions, manage your daily life, and have plenty of opportunities to express your opinions and ideas. But where's the line for you between freedom and responsibility? Do you enjoy decision-making, or need to be guided? How does it feel when you're outside your comfort zone? When does an 'opportunity to express yourself' become 'pressure to perform'?

It's important to be aware of how you're feeling about higher-level study now, and to monitor it throughout your course. Above everything else, it will help you to look after yourself. It will also play a vital part in developing your understanding of study, the 'studying to be a student' that's at the heart of this kind of work.

Start by pinning down some influential opinions and beliefs at this stage of the game. Give each of the following statements a score between 0 (completely disagree) and 10 (completely agree).	Score
Emotions have an impact on study.	
Studying is most effective when emotions are kept out.	
You need to be aware of how other students around you are feeling.	
Studying can improve your emotional health.	
Studying at a higher level is a frightening experience.	
Emotional awareness leads to more effective studying.	
Good study always involves difficult emotions.	
Higher-level study is emotional for staff as well as students.	
Students can become more confident through the process of studying.	
You can only study well if you're happy and relaxed.	

As well as giving you plenty to think about now, and providing valuable context for the other exercises in this chapter, your answers here are part of long-term self-analysis, developed throughout the whole book. See whether any of your responses change in the

process.



Ask Yourself

→ Which emotional factors are particularly significant for students?

Imagine a large lecture theatre. It's the first day of the first year for the hundreds of university students crowding in and taking their seats. You can tell just by looking at them that they come from a variety of geographic, social and cultural backgrounds. Some are considerably older than others. They're already betraying differences in behaviour and attitude as they sit down, unpack their equipment (or don't), talk to the people around them (or don't), waiting for the lecture to begin.

But what if you could also listen to their private thoughts and access their innermost feelings? What sort of things do you think you'd learn?

Spend a moment now thinking about (and maybe jotting down) all the emotional factors that are likely to be at play here. Remember to think about (potentially) positive emotions as well as (potentially) negative ones. It'll help you to consider whether any of these factors apply to you, and give you some useful insights to draw on when you explore the challenges of working with others later in the book.



Academic Advice

'On the course I lead, and many others, there's something called a PDP: a Personal Development Profile. It's an ongoing record that the students fill in to keep track of their progress, particularly the aspects that only they really know about, like how interested, engaged and confident they are. We get them to update their file at key points in the course to help them adjust their working practices, get help if they need it, and plan their next steps. But we also show them how to use their PDP to build their self-awareness. If they're continually reflecting on their work – and responding to what they think and feel – they're getting to the heart of what higher-level study is all about.' **Sophie, university lecturer and head of department**

Student Tip:

'University is definitely a personal challenge, but it's also a chance to take a greater role in things beyond yourself. You get to see how your studies relate to global concerns, and there are opportunities to start participating on a new level - in democracy, human rights, public health ... even the health of the planet itself.'

Parvinder, Pharmaceutical Sciences student

2 Express your feelings

Why are you reading a book about study? What are you hoping to get out of it? Like every other reader, you'll be coming to it with a range of different needs, interests, hopes, fears ... based on how you're feeling about different aspects of the challenge ahead. Depending on how you address them, those feelings will have a real effect on how your studies go from now on.

Here are some of the big 'triggers' for students' emotions. Read them carefully, think about the positive and negative aspects of each one, and write down a few words or phrases to record how you're feeling now about these themes.

How are you feeling about ...

... **doing something new**: starting a course with working practices, tasks and assessments that are different from anything you've done before, explained in unfamiliar terminology, shared with a set of people you've never met – and very likely in a place you don't know at all?

... **specializing**: narrowing your focus to a particular subject and attempting to explore it at length and in great depth?

... **being a beginner**: grappling with difficult new concepts and practices that will often seem unconnected with the things you already know – and may even reduce your

previous learning structures to rubble?

... **making decisions:** taking responsibility for when, where and how you work – as well as every aspect of your daily life?

... **making judgements:** gathering evidence, comparing, checking, analysing ... in order to reach conclusions and deliver verdicts – among a variety of different views?

... **persuading others:** being confident to stand by your judgements, and using various forms of communication to convince others to agree?

... **making mistakes:** revealing things that you don't know or can't do – sometimes because there aren't *any* right answers to aim for?

... **getting feedback:** doing intense, personal work, then standing back while it's discussed, unpicked, criticized?

... grow my personal confidence	
... increase my understanding of the world	
... stretch myself academically	
... enjoy new social and leisure opportunities	
... take my thinking and learning skills to the next level	



Academic Advice

'I think it's important for students to have a mix of reasons for wanting to study. It helps you to engage with all the different bits of the challenge, stay motivated and build up your resilience and resolve.' **Maggie, university learning mentor**

4 Plan your attack

When you've examined your opinions, beliefs and feelings about studying – in general, and in direct relation to you – you can start focusing on what it all means. Where are the strengths here that you can draw on, the weaknesses you need to address, the opportunities to exploit, the threats to deflect? It's a classic SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). It's a vital step in moving from *reflection* to *response*.

You're going to record the most important things that have come out of analysing your feelings about studying. You can then start choosing how you're going to respond to what you've learned about yourself.

Don't forget the other two Rs: *reframing* and *resolving*. Can any of the potential negatives be turned into positives here by the way you look at them? What sort of opportunities open up if you commit yourself to doing some key things differently?

Use the following themes to guide you. Think about each one in turn and write some thoughts about it in the appropriate space in the table below (or *spaces*; this task puts you into one of those magical grey areas, where decision-making is complex and rich).

Newness. Unfamiliar things – places, processes, people – can be unsettling and scary, but they also offer possibilities (I promise!). The unknown offers new threats but also new

opportunities.

Change. If you do it right, you'll come out of your studying *different*, in lots of ways. To reap the rewards, you'll need to dismantle old understandings, adapt to new ways of working and thinking, and cope in a world where information and ideas are in a constant state of flux.

Independence. No one's going to tell you what to do or what to think. You'll have new freedoms and new responsibilities. How does this relate to the strengths and weaknesses of your character? How confident do you feel about going it alone?

Challenge. Higher-level study isn't just about 'harder' content. The work is more demanding on many different levels. It asks new things of you as an academic, and a person. Will that hold you back or spur you on? How much does it worry you, and how much is it exactly why you're here?

Exposure. There's no hiding-place. Your judgements will be sought, shared and scrutinized. You'll be asked to perform, collaborate, debate. In print and in person you'll need to communicate and justify knowledge, understanding, skill and personal points of view. The benefits and the credit will be yours, because the intense intellectual and emotional challenge will be yours too.

Pressure. Your course will apply pressure at key points, taking you out of your comfort zone with new tasks, encouraging you to ask more and more of yourself, stepping up the assessments, raising the stakes. What will this mean for your existing strengths and weaknesses? Are you feeling threatened, or can you see the opportunities beckoning?

Use these themes to guide you, read back through the chapter for ideas, and use the SWOT table to help you record and explore your thoughts.

Respond

What will you *do* now in your studies, in response to what you've learned?

Resolve

Have you made any resolutions about your future, from looking at how things went before?

8 Know your place

What I loosely call your circumstances is made up of a number of factors. A few you have some control over, but most are just 'the way it is'. Being aware of them, and their potential impact on your studies, takes you another step towards shaping your strongest possible approach.

Read each of the points below and think about *emotional* and *practical* impacts. How these things make you feel about your studying, as well as how they might affect it in more tangible ways.

For each one, write down something mostly positive and something mostly negative. Notice which comes to mind most easily.

Finally, decide which of the two points is likely to have the *most* impact, unless something changes, and put a tick in the relevant box.

Previous education. How well has it equipped you for the challenges you're about to face?

Positive impacts

Negative impacts

Non-study work. Think about the roles and responsibilities you've had so far in your life, paid or unpaid. What is there here that could go for or against you in your studies?

Positive impacts

Negative impacts

Family. Are you affected by what your siblings, parents, even grandparents did (or didn't do) in their education? What sort of impact might your family have on what *you* do from here?

Positive impacts

Negative impacts

Social/cultural/ethnic/religious background. Does it provide support, pressure, distraction, encouragement? How do its values match those of the academic world?

Positive impacts

Negative impacts

Age. Are you the same age as most of the other people on your course? These days, it's possible to be significantly older or younger than the people you're studying with – so what are the potential advantages and disadvantages of how old *you* are?

Positive impacts

Negative impacts

Geography. Are you close enough to live at home, moving to a new city, or maybe even travelling between countries?

Positive impacts

Negative impacts

Finances. What role does money play in your decision to push ahead with your studies? Will you have to



Academic Advice

'My university's good at providing support for students' wellbeing. There are lots of different services, all fairly well resourced and widely advertised – but it's frustrating because some students still seem to be reluctant to ask for help. Studying's tough, life can be tough. It's really hard to do your work if you're not OK. But we've got pastoral tutors like me, a medical centre, counselling services, student mentors, a chaplaincy team. They've all got specialist skills, but they can also signpost you to other people who might be more appropriate. So I always urge students to speak to someone if they've got issues, and to get in there early. It's all anonymous and often you don't even have to go anywhere – just do it online or over the phone. The help is there if people reach out to use it.' **Jackie, university tutor**

9 Apply the 4Rs. Part 3: Circumstances

There's a lot about our personal situation that we just can't change. But there's also plenty that we *can*, particularly when we choose the most positive reactions and highlight ways to make the best of the position we're in.

Reflect

Looking at your current circumstances, what are the most important things for you to bear in mind?

Reframe

Which aspects could become more favourable for you if you looked at them differently,