

“What advice would you give to students starting your course?”

University life is challenging, exciting and mildly intimidating, especially as it is a very different experience to that of school or College. Biological Sciences are (at least in my opinion) the most fascinating subjects available to study, with plenty of opportunities to tailor your learning to a specific field.

As a 3rd year undergraduate studying a Biology based subject, there are numerous pieces of advice I would give to a new student.

My first piece of advice would be to use fresher's week as a chance to familiarise yourself with the campus and the surrounding city. This makes the process of settling in a lot easier, particularly if you are a student who has moved away from home. Due to unfortunate circumstances I was unable to make fresher's week and I still feel that I missed out on a significant university experience.

Secondly I would greatly recommend that after your arrival you check your details on the faculty intranet as soon as possible. With so many new students entering the University's system, it is possible that some mistakes will be made. I was accidentally registered for two different departments and as a result I had two different email addresses and intranet accounts. It was only because I reported a fault with my email account that I found out the account I was using was due to be deleted the next day, so I was very close to losing all my work! (This also illustrates why it is so vital to back up all your work.)

Once settled, it is extremely important to start studying as you mean to go on. Biology degrees involve many more hours of lecturing than most non-science degrees; hence the organisation of comprehensible notes right from the first lecture is essential. I found it helpful to write up my notes and glue my handouts into hardback notebooks, at the end of each lecture. This keeps everything together and makes revising at the end of the semester much simpler.

To give essays and exam answers an extra edge, read around the subject to supplement course notes. A recommended reading list is available for each course unit, making this easy to do. Also, published research papers and reviews are readily available on the Internet and are a great way to keep up to date with recent discoveries and areas of work. This helped me to develop an idea of the area of biology that I was most interested in and hence helped me decide on a 3rd year project that I would enjoy.

I cannot stress enough how bad an idea it is to leave the preparation of coursework submission up until the last minute. Alas most students do just this. Staying up until 5am, the morning before the deadline, with a jammed printer and an essay that is 200 words too short is not a thrilling experience, nor is it a good way to achieve decent marks. It is best to give yourself plenty of time to allow proof reading of your work and a chance to keep making improvements. If struggling to start a piece of work, it can be helpful to sometimes write the more appealing middle sections first, before working the rest around it.

Tutorials are incredibly useful. They tend to consist of relatively small groups of students, presenting the perfect opportunity to ask lots of questions regarding personal; and academic problems. It also comes in very useful to actually do the work your tutor sets you before the next session. Otherwise you will find yourself sat with no clue as to what is going on, terrified you will be picked upon to answer a question. For the same reason it is also a good idea to do any

electronic problem based learning work yourself and not steal your best friend's answers. Many of the computer programs you will be taught how to use, (such as molecular modelling, sequence alignment and spreadsheet programs) will come in very handy for assessed work, so it is important to know how to use them. Especially since many help documents frustratingly tend to tell you only what you already know.

Laboratory sessions are enormous fun and a good way to pick up essential practical skills. In the first year it is important to remember that such sessions are more about gaining experience in performing practical work rather than acquiring perfect results. In reality, even professional researchers are lucky if they get perfect results for their experiments, as there are so many different factors that can affect biological processes. It is worth asking the demonstrators lots of questions so you can understand why certain methods are used. Demonstrators are usually PhD students, who were in the same situation as you as little as three years ago, so they tend to be very approachable. They are also often able to inform you of shortened versions of the methods, occasionally allowing you to finish sooner.

However, University isn't about working non-stop, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is also a chance to join societies, develop new interests, build up your CV and meet lots of new people. Nevertheless, it is imperative to finely balance work and play and quickly realised that spending every free period in the pub is not a good plan of action. It is wise to stop and consider how much reading; writing or revision can be achieved in the time it takes to drink two pints! I find that I am too mentally exhausted to concentrate on work after around 9.30pm, so it is after this time I tend to go out and socialise, providing I don't have a 9am lecture the next day. Perfect!

In conclusion, I have found my 3 years of studying Biology to be captivating and very rewarding. I hope my advice and experiences are helpful to anybody who reads them and that they enjoy their time at University as much as I have.