

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

## **Introduction**

Some students work to excel in their course and compete for the top grades. Others may devote more attention to partying. It goes without saying that you need to pass all your exams- unless you enjoy re-sits. The first year of biosciences I found many parts to be revision of knowledge you should be familiar with and so be assured there is plenty of time for fun extracurricular activities (I am sure you don't need any advice on this!) *and* maintaining a conscientious work ethic.

## **Aim**

To obtain the optimal balance between enjoying the novel and exciting experience of university life with managing the workload effectively.

## **Methods and Results**

Another day, another lecture

Lectures are useful because one needs to be aware of theories and mechanisms before being set amok in the laboratory. It helps to print out any uploaded notes your lecturer may have considerately prepared and bring them along to the appropriate lectures. They should provide a solid foundation for you to write your own notes upon. A small, but obvious tip, include the lecture number and date on your notes. If you do not already, you will realise the value of this when you come to revise at the end. Attend all lectures; one of the less obvious reasons is that sometimes lecturers may hint at possible exam material. That, to me, is too good an opportunity to miss!

I always appreciate analogies given by lecturers. This makes concepts easier to understand and digest if you can relate it to familiar every day things. The internal timing mechanisms in a population of somatic cells are synchronised via the suprachiasmatic nucleus in the brain. Without this structure, the cells become desynchronised with its neighbours, just like an orchestra playing without a conductor becomes mistimed and disordered, or a bad student.

Increasingly, some lectures may take the form of electronic- based learning exercises- an opportunity to practise your IT skills. Other forms may be seminars, debates and tutorial presentations, all adding a little vitality to your routine!

Ask questions

Academics are only too happy to answer any questions or clarify any matters that you may have about their lectures or even beyond the content. Asking questions is a sign of curiosity, an essential element in the scientist. Do not be afraid of voicing your views or challenging opinions in science, you never know, you may be on the route to a great discovery!

## **Ready...steady...Experiment!**

Laboratory practical classes allow aspiring and inquisitive students to command science with their own hands. However, I've found that sometimes they can seem rushed, frantic and not always to your desired effect if your enzyme decides to die. Do not be disheartened by this. There is likely to be a 'Here's something I prepared earlier' demonstration by the course coordinator. It is accepted that things may not always work given that you usually just have one chance. I found that reading the experimental protocol and highlighting the aims of the study the night before the practical to be invaluable to understanding the purpose of the experiment and made things seem

less hectic during the practical. To enhance your laboratory experiences and supplement your lectures, there are usually related questions or experimental reports to be completed.

#### Personal Shopper Tutor

Keep in contact with the personal tutor assigned to you by attending both tutorials and individual meetings. This is the person who will write your academic reference. Let him/ her know about your progress- good or bad- throughout your course and of any worries you may have. In this way your reference is likely to be tailored to reflect your true potential.

#### Scout's motto

Be prepared. Exams are never too far away. Do not shy away from starting revision and make friends with the university library. You will then find, if you are like me, after listening to all these wise cautions, you will be frantically revising on the night before the exam. This is all too natural and it has taken me all my academic life to date to acknowledge this. The point is, not to be overly harsh on yourself if- despite your best intentions- you do not always manage to keep on top of revision. Being prepared also means being able to acknowledge this situation. Whilst in my opinion, revision is not always the most delightful prospect, I can confer a sense of achievement to strike off the modules I have covered, look back on all the revision notes I made and be able to answer sample questions. It gives me a sense of security and prevents me from falling into a stress- ridden inertia, too mortified about the masses of revision to even contemplate making a start.

#### Degrees of freedom

Check emails daily; the main body of communication between you and your university is usually via email. Respect deadlines. A deadline is a deadline and- unless there are exceptional circumstances- not a *minute* later, as one of my unfortunate friends found out recently. It is also your responsibility to attend lectures. Of course the concept of freedom means all night parties too so all's fair in university life!

## Discussion

#### Experimental errors

I do not deny that there has been many a dark day. Making firm commitments from the start I find, is a fruitful catalyst to embarking on your caffeine and ATP- fuelled, sometimes bug and viral contaminated journey to scientific enlightenment. Intricacies such as the alcohol dehydrogenase pathway may not always sink easily into an alcohol- abused brain- especially at nine am to stay happily waiting for exam time. I worked hard to achieve my current status and there have been close tears and rollercoaster rides of adrenaline when one thinks 'Did I back that work up before my computer crashed?'

#### 'Me' time

The best and most well rounded students also ensure to make time for relaxation and enjoyment (in other ways than science!); a virtue that careers advisors are most keen to point out. There are thousands of students studying the same degree as you. What makes you stand out? Do something! Start/ enrol in a society, sign-up for voluntary work. This is also extra arsenal for making your CV unique. A degree is only just the starting point of your career.

## Concluding remarks

Finally, there is hard work and there is Hard Work. Why go the long way around when there is an effective shortcut? Thinking laterally will gain you more than just a science degree in the end. I will leave to you to think laterally upon this.