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CHAPTER

1

The Distinctive Learning Journey on a Business and Management Degree

At the heart of your business and management degree, there are five essential skills for success. This first chapter presents an overview of the book showing how the chapters are structured around these five skills:

Box 1.1 Five essential skills for success in business and management studies

Time management	Academic reading	Academic writing	Group working
INDEPENDENT LEARNING			

Independent learning underpins all university programmes, presenting any student with the challenge of spending a significant proportion of time studying away from class, and with limited direction from tutors. While this more self-reliant form of study has been sweepingly adopted by UK universities, it is likely to confront you with a different educational landscape to the one you have been used to before. Business and management studies programmes, in particular, are deliberately designed in this way to foster students' resourcefulness – a crucial requirement for your future success in the dynamic workplaces of the modern corporate world.

An employability skill that is closely related to independent learning and correspondingly vital to meeting the demands of the business world is **time management**. With so much time left to your own devices on management degrees, you must develop a rigorous self-discipline and learn techniques to organise your studies efficiently. Again, this will be invaluable once you enter the fast-paced working environment.

Similarly, effective **team-working** is a crucial skill for those entering the corporate world. There are likely to be several assessed group projects on each year of your business degree, and successful students also take every opportunity to work together outside class in less formal study groups. Whilst these can be challenging experiences

at times, learning to work effectively with others on business projects is vital training for your future employability.

The other two skills indicated in Box 1.1 as essential to business and management programme study are **academic reading and writing**. Not surprisingly, these are the major factors in determining your academic performance at university and are paramount to academic success. Business and management degree assessments have specific reading and writing requirements, particularly in terms of research, referencing and critical analysis. These skills are covered in depth over several chapters of this textbook so that you come to understand and directly meet your management tutors' academic expectations.

Before we move on to a more detailed explanation of each chapter's coverage of the essential skills for success, try this quiz to find out how much you already know about what university study involves:

ACTIVITY 1.1

How will this programme differ from your previous education?

1 How much time will you spend in class on a typical business degree compared with your previous education?

A. Half as much B. Twice as much C. The same D. A third as much

2 What is the appropriate ratio of independent learning to classroom study?

A. 1:2 B. 3:1 C. 2:1 D. 1:3

3 What is likely to be the biggest demand on your time for successful study on business and management programmes?

A. Group work with others
B. Academic writing
C. Socialising
D. Academic reading

4 Which type of external support will best help you adapt to university study?

A. Personal tutor
B. Peer support
C. Subject teacher
D. Learning support, e.g. library, academic skills, language unit

5 Which personal attribute will best enable academic achievement?

A. Self-management
B. Motivation to study
C. Reflecting on your learning
D. Self-confidence

6 What is the most common cause of low grades in management students' coursework?

A. Poor referencing
B. English language
C. Not answering the question
D. Confused structure

7 What is the most important skill for high marks in coursework?

A. Referencing
B. Critical analysis
C. English fluency
D. Essay structure

8 What do we mean by critical analysis in management studies?

A. Applying academic theory to business practice
B. Describing an academic theory or a business situation
C. Finding weakness in academic arguments
D. Comparing and contrasting different authors' views on the same subject

Compare your answers against those shown at the end of this chapter.

Like any other major life transition, the university learning journey is essentially an emotional process. Whilst each student's experience will be unique, you may well experience a confusing variety of feelings at first. Typical challenges for many students finding their way into this new learning community can include: feeling different; not belonging; being 'a small fish in a big pond'. At the same time, of course, you will naturally be excited about embarking on this whole new stage of life: a chance to make new friends from other backgrounds, try different activities, and lay the foundation for your career.

As we can see from these students' comments, this new adventure invokes quite mixed responses:

> *Actually … to some extent … I'm confident. How much I can clear this target, I don't know … but as long as I keep trying very hard, concentrate on studies … yes, I'm confident … to get a degree.*
>
> (Hiro, MBA)

> *There are some questions that I don't know anything about … I'm clueless … everyone in my family thinks I'm the smartest because of my previous educational results. But I don't know … I don't think it counts for much here!*
>
> (Mary, BSc Accounting and Finance)

> *I'm not afraid. If I were afraid I wouldn't be here … No, just normal. Maybe sometimes I just feel upset if I don't understand … but over the whole year, I will make my self-belief very strong … to take me through that.*
>
> (Victoria, MSc International Business Management)

Many students will find the tumult of new experiences quite disorientating, for a while at least. You are bound to need some time to settle into this new life. During this transition phase, whether it be weeks or even months, remember that you must

Pause for Thought

So how are you feeling about your own situation? Take your attention inwards for a few moments. Ask yourself how you really feel right now about being a university student. Jot down your instinctive responses in the space below:

already be a successful student to have reached university in the first place. That has taken hard work, dedication and intelligence – all vital capabilities for maintaining your success in this new learning environment. Remember, too, that your tutors and other support services are all there to help you succeed. They understand the challenges that thousands of business and management students have faced before, and can enable you to overcome those.

However, you also need to quickly reach a functional level of understanding of the higher education (HE) learning environment generally, and how to effectively study unfamiliar business subjects in particular. You need a refocussed set of skills to plan your studies and pass the assessments that you face in each semester. As you then see your personal and academic skills improving, so too will your overall self-confidence rise accordingly.

To help you make that transition, the rest of this chapter presents an overview of the **Five Essential Skills for Success**. Each section includes a key to where you can then find more detailed guidance throughout the book on how to develop that skill.

Independent learning

You will have seen in Box 1.1 that independent learning is depicted as the foundation to the other four key skills for success. Business and management taught programmes at both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) level are particularly characterised by independent learning – typically requiring only 10–15 hours of class attendance per week. For the rest of the time, you are working mostly without direct tutor guidance, predominantly reliant on yourself and to some extent other students.

> *There are some subjects that you actually have no clue about, and then the lecturer comes and has this assumption that everybody in class knows about the subject. Then he just rattles on, so either I'm very stupid … or I'm very stupid [laughing].*
>
> (Esther, MSc Sustainable Operations Management)

The education system here is totally different. I was always being spoon-fed before, but here you have to do everything on your own … maybe I'm feeling that burden is on me.

(Ali, BSc Financial Planning)

The challenge of independent learning can create an anxious, confusing experience for many students, especially in their first few months. Ironically, this may well be because of the new and strangely undisciplined freedom that you encounter as more independent adults at university. You have to make the shift to more autonomous learning, and this demands greater resourcefulness than you may have typically needed before. As a management student, this is all part of the employability skills development that is inherent to a degree programme designed to prepare you for the business world – whether that be in the corporate workplace or as an entrepreneur.

Box 1.2 Independent learning map

HE CHALLENGES	CORE SKILLS	CHAPTERS
Anxiety or confusion	Self-efficacy	2
Disorganised group work	Project management	10
Interpersonal conflicts	Communication	11
Procrastination	Time management	3
Minimal tutor guidance	Academic reading Referencing Academic writing Reflective writing	4 & 5 7 6 & 8 9

In addition to the range of personal and academic skills required for success at university, there is no escaping the crucial importance of developing the quality of self-discipline. It is clear that independent learning is inextricably linked to time management, which is as much about your attitude as it is about your abilities. So this is the next of the Five Essential Skills for Success:

Time management

The apparently liberating experience of becoming an independent adult at university can create unconscious work avoidance mechanisms. In other words, without someone regularly telling you what to do, it is sometimes too easy to put off important tasks until the last minute. Such procrastination results in disorganised academic reading, which can lead in turn to 'all-nighter' assignment writing – the 'too little, too late' syndrome. This is both stressful and unproductive.

Effective time management is therefore crucial for well-being and academic performance. Success-oriented students soon realise that they need a systematic process to:

- Organise their study appropriately across all subjects.
- Allow flexibility to focus on key tasks or difficulties within certain subjects when necessary.
- Break tasks and projects down into manageable 'chunks'.
- Achieve high productivity within dedicated blocks of time.
- Balance study, social and personal needs healthily.

Developing these key self-management skills will not only realise immediate improvements in your studies, but they will also significantly enhance your employability in the graduate marketplace. Practising and refining productive time management techniques will make you that much more capable of coping with the high pressure of achieving targets, managing multiple projects and meeting deadlines that all characterise the modern corporate world. This second essential skill is another example of how business and management programmes prepare you for this world not only from the business knowledge that you learn but also through the soft skills that you develop in the process.

There are masses of online resources prescribing the 'best' techniques for effective time management. Many of these could be useful, but for such a subjective issue, you will need to find the system that works best for you. As most people eventually discover, you must engage in a process of trial and error over several weeks or months to become consistently well organised. A wide choice of potential strategies to achieve this capability is therefore presented in the chapters shown in Box 1.3.

Box 1.3 Time management map

HE CHALLENGES	CORE SKILLS	RELEVANT CHAPTERS
Variety of tasks/activities	Organising and scheduling	3
Procrastination/ distractions	Values-based prioritising	3 & 10
Reading volume/ complexity	Research	4 & 5

The biggest 'consumer' of your time is likely to be academic reading. This is the next area of university study covered in the Five Essential Skills for Success:

Academic reading

Reading is a skill we all learned as small children. So it can be easy to assume that any kind of reading is second nature to us now, and that this should present no significant challenges by the time we reach university.

However, educational research tells a different story: Academic reading may actually be the biggest problem of all for degree-level study (Ryan 2010; Strauss and Mooney 2011). Why do you think this is?

Pause for Thought

What do you think are the main reasons cited by students for finding academic reading so difficult? Write your immediate thoughts below:

Management academics demand that their students read 'widely but also deeply'. This high volume of reading can soon become overwhelming as students try to prepare for classes, learn the module materials and research for assignments – all across multiple subjects. Most of these business subjects are highly discursive – the topics involve ongoing debates fuelled by evolving research from many different studies. Their findings are published in management journals, business reports and government documents, requiring you to extend your reading well beyond the course textbooks. This pressure can be compounded by minimal direction from tutors on how to prioritise the most relevant texts from their long reading lists.

In addition to being highly selective in finding the 'right' texts in the first place, you need to carefully target which sections of those texts you actually concentrate on. A process of smarter academic reading helps you develop the capability to quickly sift through each source to find the 'nuggets of gold' that you actually need for an assignment. This can save you vast amounts of wasted time and effort in both reading and writing for management degree programmes.

A key proposition of this book is that you read and write *in parallel*. As well as saving time, this also means that you learn as much from the process of writing as you do from reading. In other words, you do not need to read lots of texts, and

Box 1.4 Academic reading map

HE CHALLENGES	CORE SKILLS	CHAPTERS
Volume of potential sources	Selective research	4
Volume of text in each source	Targeted, smarter reading	5
Competing module demands	Time management	3

amass pages of notes, *before* you actually start writing a draft essay. Once you have established a rough structure for your assignment from the core reading material, you feed in ideas and data from other texts as you go along. As you begin to master the process of effective academic research, this naturally leads to academic writing, which is therefore covered next in the Five Essential Skills for Success:

Academic writing

Business and management modules are assessed almost entirely by written assignments and exams. Four chapters of this book are therefore devoted to academic writing. These offer several examples of high-grade student texts, including a complete essay, from a selection of business and management subjects at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. These are complemented by further exercises for you to practise and develop this skill. You can then check your own examples against model paragraphs in the Activity Answers.

The pathway to success in business and management studies lies in **critical thinking**. This is the foremost requirement for achieving high assignment and exam grades on these degree programmes. This means that you must learn how to:

- **Develop your arguments by integrating ideas and information from multiple academic sources in the field of management literature.**
- **Evaluate the meaning and value of those data in the context of the topic that you are researching.**
- **Demonstrate your understanding of that topic by relating those concepts directly to your assignment or exam question in every paragraph of your writing.**

A major characteristic of this critical style of writing in management assignments and exams is **objectivity**. As you can see from the three points above, tutors expect you to put aside your existing opinions as you conduct research into a topic. You need to examine the range of other authors' ideas as neutrally as possible so that you can build a reasoned, impartial argument encompassing different sides of the relevant, current debate around that subject. As these theoretical debates are continuously evolving in most of the business topics you will be studying, the foremost purpose of your academic writing is to explicitly show the tutor your understanding of these complex, ongoing discussions.

Whilst this objective, theoretical and discursive style of writing is predominant in management degree assessments, a minority of your essays will require a more *subjective* approach. This personalised style of writing, usually termed self-reflection, involves writing about your own experiences as a business student, e.g. a report on an industrial placement, albeit still in an analytical way. A summary of the key characteristics of self-reflective writing include:

- Using first person, e.g. 'This experience showed *me* that …'; '*I* found that …'; 'As a group, *we* didn't seem to …'
- Exploring *how* experiences affected you, i.e. emotionally as well as practically.
- Not just describing what happened, or what you did, but, more importantly, *analysing why* you acted or reacted in these ways.

Box 1.5 Academic writing map

HE CHALLENGES	CORE SKILLS	CHAPTERS
Academic writing style – finding the 'right level'	Sentence/paragraph construction	6
Integrating sourced ideas and information	Referencing	7
Developing a convincing academic argument	Critical analysis	8
Learning constructively from 'good and bad' experiences	Self-reflection	9

Whilst some university coursework will be assessed individually, a proportion of your assignments will be required as group work submissions. This presents an altogether different challenge: How do you work collaboratively with a group of other students who may well have quite different ideas and capacities for effective academic writing?

This thorny issue is considered as the last of the Five Essential Skills for Success below.

Group working

Your fellow students will play a significant role in your university experience. On the positive side, there is so much to discover from others' backgrounds, cultures, personal aptitudes and academic subject knowledge. Some of this peer-assisted learning will be formalised: your university tutors will often set group work projects in which you may be required to work together, sometimes to produce graded reports or presentations. They know that employers are looking for graduates who can show that they have developed positive, collaborative, interpersonal skills. These soft skills are seen as paramount to your capacity to work effectively in teams on business projects in the workplace. So, it is likely that a majority of your business and management module assessments will involve an element of group work.

You can also set up your own, informal peer groups to help each other by sharing reading tasks, discussing ideas and exploring essay plans. There is no doubt that this **peer support** will strongly complement your individual academic study. Each of you will have different strengths to contribute, in terms of both subject knowledge and personal skills. When all of these attributes are combined together across a group, the total outcome of that collaboration can be even greater than the apparent sum of your individual contributions. This is referred to as **synergy**.

However, whilst synergy is the ideal aim of group work, students do often find the reality to be rather different (Elliott and Robinson 2012; Kimmel and Volet 2012). Working with a diverse group of people can produce some unexpected **interpersonal challenges**. Competing aims, personality clashes and contrasting values are just some of the potential barriers to effective communication in teams, especially on assessed projects.

As this is such an important and challenging employability issue, two chapters of this book are devoted to helping you manage your group working experiences effectively. These chapters include self-assessment quizzes to identify what kind of team player you are and practical communication strategies for the group to harness everyone's participation synergistically. They are followed by a further chapter on making presentations – the typical format for delivering your group work reports on business and management topics:

Box 1.6 Group work map

HE CHALLENGES	CORE SKILLS	CHAPTERS
Differences of cultural and personal values	Empathic communication	10 & 11
Unequal contributions	Organised planning Conflict management	10 11
Making group presentations	Public speaking	12

How to best use this book

You may well have hoped to just read sections of this book, and somehow absorb all the important points deeply enough to transform your approach to studying. However, that *passive* form of reading – that you might use for browsing a website or social media – has been proven to be most ineffective for academic study (Ryan 2005). Instead, each chapter of the book is based around regular exercises that encourage your *active reading*, which is imperative for a genuine learning process. This dynamic form of study involves:

- **Pause for Thought** boxes, which encourage you to stop and reflect on how the presented ideas relate to your own experience.
- **Activities** that give you the chance to gain a meaningful understanding of those ideas by trying them out in practice.

In addition to the answers you write in the book exercises, it is recommended that you also start a **reflective writing journal** to consolidate your learning. You can capture deeper insights by using this separate journal to record your feelings, thoughts, concerns, anxieties and breakthroughs. Self-reflection is recognised by business schools as an important employability skill involved in processes such as Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that are inherent to career progression in the modern workplace. Examples of typical modules that focus on personal development in this way include: Employability and Enterprise Skills; Student Self-development; Personal Development Planning. Chapter 9 explains more about how to use a reflective journal to support your learning throughout a management degree.

Activity Answers

Activity 1.1

Q.1: Answers A or D

This depends, of course, on how much time you spent in class in your previous education. But the emphasis on independent learning at university is likely to mean that you will have significantly less classroom-based teaching than before.

Q.2: Answer B or perhaps C

Business and management students may only spend around 12 hours per week in lectures and tutorials. Yet tutors can expect them to engage in around three times that many hours of learning away from class, mostly on academic reading. So if you chose Answer B, you are likely to be closest to the reality of management degree study at many universities.

Q.3: Answer D

Working with other students in groups, and writing your management essays, will certainly involve a lot of your time. But, how well you do those tasks will depend on how much research you have carried out, and how well you have understood that academic reading.

Tutors in most of your business subjects will expect you to 'read widely and deeply'. There are so many potential texts for each subject, and the volume of this research can easily become overwhelming. Learning how to manage this reading selectively is explained in Chapter 5.

Q.4: 'All of the above'

The real point of this question is to highlight the range of support services that are likely to be available to you at your university. You will find different types of support helpful at different times. Help-seeking is regarded as a positive learning strategy in higher education. Although so much reliance is laid on independent learning, this does not mean you are on your own. Module leaders, personal tutors, support services and other students can all offer useful guidance in different ways that will contribute to your personal development.

Q.5: 'All of the above'

Which of the factors is the most important for successful study is debatable, of course. We can easily recognise that any of the personal qualities mentioned in this

question are critical to ongoing success. How you manage your work–life balance, reflect on your achievements, improve from your setbacks, and maintain your belief in your capabilities (self-efficacy) … all of these are vital factors for getting the most from your university experience. Just as importantly, they are all crucial to effective performance in the corporate world for which business and management degrees are preparing you.

Q.6: Answer C

Management tutors will typically set quite specific questions, i.e. with a narrow focus on a particular topic. They expect you to address that focus directly and consistently throughout your assignment. If you diverge from this, perhaps to try and show your wider knowledge of the general business context, they will not find the depth of investigation required at degree level and are likely to mark you down accordingly.

Q.7: Answer B

Critical analysis can be a quantum leap in many university students' way of thinking about academic subjects. Yet this is perhaps the most important skill that must be developed for achieving high grades in business studies assignments. The answer to Q. 8 below gives an initial idea of what management tutors mean by critical thinking.

Q.8: Definitely Answer D, probably A, and possibly C

Tutors across the range of business and management subject areas differ to some extent in what they mean by critical analysis. In the relatively practical field of Accounting, for example, they may have rather different expectations from those in the more theoretically discursive area of Human Resource Management. However, recent UK business school research did identify some common themes to what their lecturers are looking for in terms of critical analysis:

Answer D

Much of your academic research should involve reading widely and thoughtfully enough for you to understand the similarities and differences between different authors' views on a business topic. You need to show your understanding of the ongoing debates evident in many management subjects.

Answer A

Management tutors expect you to further demonstrate your understanding of theoretical ideas by showing how these explain what has been happening in certain business situations and perhaps how to develop strategies to improve those.

Answer C

Some authors argue that critical thinking is at least partly about finding the weaknesses in academic arguments (Cottrell 2017). However, great care needs to be taken to not do this subjectively, i.e. simply from your own opinion. Limitations emerge more credibly from the application of the two critical processes in A and D above. So you may best concentrate on mastering those first.

See Chapter 8 for much more explanation on this challenging process of critical analysis.

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