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10 top tips for successful distance learning

Distance learning offers cost-effective, flexible access to lifelong education. You can now study in your own time, at your own pace. The benefits are clear for all, from University students to working adults or stay-at-home parents wanting to return to a career after having children. With a wealth of supporting resources available online, there has never been a better time to get the degree you always wanted. However, self-study does come with unique challenges. You will probably never see or meet your teacher or classmates. Restrictions like this can make it hard to stay motivated. We have put together 10 top tips on how to ensure your course is a success.

1: Check you have all the tools you need:

- Spend time looking at the course. Familiarise yourself with the design and make sure you will have access to all the tools necessary to complete assignments.
- Distance learning courses have many different materials. Remember you are not just watching or listening. You are learning from those various materials.
- Purchase your textbooks and study guides, etc. well in advance.
- Resolve all technology issues during the first week of class so you don't get behind.

2: Set up a study schedule:

- You may find that your career, family, hobbies and social commitments leave little time for studying. Try to identify times when you will be fresh and attentive.
- Keep a calendar showing the number of weeks in the quarter and mark it off with the amount of work you need to do each week and the days when you will expect to take tests, submit projects, contact the instructor etc. Without reminders from other students or a classroom instructor, it can be easy to fall behind.

3: Be an early bird:

- If a paper or other major project is required, start on it early. It may require you to do online research or go to a local college library to read books, journals, and papers. This will take a lot of time.

4: Find your motivators:

- Find out what makes you persevere at a task. Perhaps the satisfaction of finishing a module works for you, or promising yourself a treat after a study session, e.g. "I'll study for two solid hours, and then I'll go to the cinema."
- Look out for real life situations and examples of what you're learning about. It's easier to be interested in something if you're involved in it, not just reading about it.
- Try practising by doing where you can.

5: Set yourself goals:

- Thinking about doing the whole course can be overwhelming. Accomplishing parts of it in reasonable time periods is encouraging and constructive.
- Break the lessons/assignments into manageable chunks. You might not have time to do a full lesson in one night, so plan for how much you can do, then stick to it until you're done.

6: Make a study buddy:

- Ask your instructor for help in identifying other students who may want to work with you, or get input from former students of the course. Ask previous learners where they thought "if only I had known that . . ."
- Check the Web for discussion topics, forums, etc. which may help you.
- Tell people what you're doing. You're more likely to stick to it if a co-worker knows you're doing it, they may even be able to put you in touch with other people who can help you.
- Ask a friend to check up on you to make sure you are sticking to your schedule, or to proof read your work.

7: Check in with your tutor:

- E-mail your instructor with any questions well in advance of due dates. Remember that they may not respond immediately. A reasonable time period to wait is 24-48 hours.
- Visit or call your assigned instructor regularly. Ask how your progress is going. Point out areas that you think are difficult or unclear. Ask for help. The instructor is your coach. You are in charge.

8: Use your time wisely:

- Be sure you have mastered the material that will be the basis for a particular test before you take that test. Don't be in too much of a rush; that can lead to sloppy and ineffective test work.
- Set deadlines for yourself and stick to them.
- Pace yourself. You're in this to learn, not just to get a certificate, so make sure you're learning, not just racing through the materials.

9: Celebrate your successes:

- Reward yourself with whatever works for you, along the way. Remember, you chose to do this. Be proud of your accomplishments.
- Review the results of quizzes. Learn from your mistakes and celebrate your successes.

10: Use all materials available:

- Take notes. Imagine questions that might be on a test from your study guide, from your textbook, from films or audio tapes.
- Read your textbook and other assigned reading. Watch the video material if required.
- Don't substitute one for the other or assume class notes on the web are enough. Test questions will be taken from all sources.