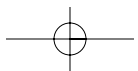
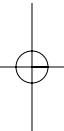
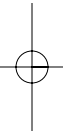


**PART 1 HOW TO DEVELOP
YOUR PERSONAL
SKILLS**



1 How to Prepare Yourself for Higher Education

Overview – what's in this chapter?

- Why do you need to upgrade your personal skills?
- Handling the transition into higher education
- Recognising your own motivation to learn, grow and develop
- Understanding your emotions in the developmental process
- Self-efficacy and self-confidence
- Follow-up activities, further reading and websites to look up
- Time for review and reflection

Why do you need to upgrade your personal skills?

Try completing this short self-scoring test, to assess your own level of confidence in relation to developing your own personal skills in order to complete your course successfully.



Activity: Why do you need to read this chapter?

You need to self score each question on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is low and 10 is high.

1. How confident do you feel about starting your course?	
2. How confident do you feel about meeting new people?	
3. How organised do you feel you are in terms of your studies?	

(Continued)

8 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY*(Continued)*

4. How confident do you feel about your study skills?	
5. How motivated do you feel about completing your course?	
6. How confident do you feel about overcoming any barriers?	
7. How able are you to handle the emotional side of your course?	
8. How clearly can you visualise your next role after your course?	
9. How well do you think you present yourself to other people?	
10. How confident do you feel that you can complete your course?	
Total score	
<p>Interpretation</p> <p>What did you score?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 50% You definitely will find a lot of help in this chapter. • 50%–75% There is still plenty to learn in this chapter. • 75%–100% You are very confident – read on to confirm your understanding. 	

What do you want to achieve by studying in higher education?

What do you want to achieve by studying in higher education? This is a question that you may already be asking. Understanding your answer will have a lot to do with you successfully completing your course.

There is a considerable drop out rate during the first year for most undergraduate courses, which is a tragedy for all those concerned. After all the new students had worked hard, got good grades, got there and yet failed at the first hurdle. Why does this happen? More importantly, why should you let it happen to you?

This chapter is first about helping you make a successful transition into higher education. How was your induction? You may have felt confused or overloaded by the end of day one. Then there are the problems of meeting new people and getting your studies organised.

The chapter next considers your motivation – what you hope to achieve and why. What barriers there are to be overcome and how will you do this. How anxious are you about the process? The chapter then goes on to look at how you can handle your emotions in what is a developmental process.

Fourthly, the chapter looks at *self-efficacy* and how you can build self-confidence in order to succeed in your studies, in employment and in all that lies ahead. You might think that this is rather too soon and that perhaps it should be at the end of the book – but read on, it's what it's all about!

Finally there are some follow-on activities, suggested further reading, websites to look up, and some space for review and reflection. Reflection will be a recurring theme of this book. It is simply about thinking – but in a structured way – in order to help us learn, grow and develop.

Handling the transition into higher education

How did you feel on the first day?

The first day in higher education can be quite traumatic for many new students. There will almost certainly be an induction programme organised for you and it could last for a whole week or even for two. Many people feel that they are subject to *information overload* as a series of well meaning 'talking heads' supply endless information – all of which, they tell you, is absolutely essential.



Activity: How did you feel at the start?

1. Write a paragraph expressing how you felt on the first day in higher education.

2. Write another paragraph about how you felt at the end of the first week. Was it better or worse?

(Continued)

10 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY*(Continued)*

3. Write a paragraph about how you felt at the end of the first month. You might need to make a diary date to do this.

What is culture shock?

Culture shock is experienced when people are first exposed to a new and alien culture. They may feel confused and disorientated. When people enter higher education there is always an element of culture shock, because virtually everyone was somewhere else with a different culture before they arrived. International students are often more prone to suffering from culture shock, not only because of differences in the education system, but also because of language and cultural differences. Indeed it is generally true to say that the greater the difference between where you came from you where are now, the more likely you are to feel the effects of culture shock.

There are good and bad ways to help overcome culture shock. Consider the following two lists.

Good ways ...

Become more socially integrated (see next section).
 Eat in the refectory.
 Visit the Students Union and see what is on offer.
 Join student societies, attend meetings and activities.
 Read and file away all that 'stuff' from induction.
 Get your studies organised, check out your timetable, etc.
 Log onto the computer system and check student websites, blogs, etc.
 Visit the library and check out the facilities and the nearest book shop.

Bad ways ...

Avoid everybody, especially from your course.
 Eat in your room.
 Cut classes.
 Don't do any work.
 Deny what is really happening.
 Resort to drink or drugs.
 Drop out.
 Go home for good!

**Activity: Overcoming culture shock**

1. Have a look through the 'good ways' outlined above and make a list of things that you need to do over the first few days and weeks.
2. Keep the list in a place where you can see it and tick off things as you achieve them. It's important to record your successes!

Do you feel homesick or like dropping out?

Culture shock can lead to homesickness, and you may feel like packing up and going home. It's very common to feel like this, particularly if you feel overwhelmed by the workload, the place or the people – perhaps all three!

Dropping out of your course is a big decision. It is life changing and so deserves thorough consideration. Knowing *why* you want to leave or stay will be really important if you are going to make the right decision for you.

**Activity: Thinking of leaving your course?**

1. Try making two lists to consider your reasons for going or staying.

Reasons for going...		Reasons for staying...	
•		•	
•		•	
•		•	
•		•	
•		•	
•		•	
•		•	
•		•	

2. Now consider:

- Are your reasons more emotional or rational?

(Continued)

12 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY

(Continued)

- Are any of your reasons short term and likely to change?
- What help and support could you access? (See next section.)

Here are some more things you really should do before dropping out:

- Talk it over with your friends / other people on the course. You may be surprised at how much they want you to stay.
- Talk it over with your course leader, personal tutor or any other member of the academic staff you feel comfortable talking to.
- You may have accommodation problems or just be unhappy where you are. There should be an accommodation officer or department you can talk to about this.
- You may have special needs that can be accommodated by the institution and there should be someone to talk to about this, probably a whole department called 'student services' to check out.
- You may actually feel depressed or be suffering from anxiety problems. This is not a reason for leaving, but rather a reason for staying and working through your problems. You should be able to get support through a student counsellor who will probably be accessed through your student services department or student medical centre.
- Your students union can also help with welfare and academic problems and will be experienced in giving advice and support.

Finally, if you have worked through the two lists in the previous activity and accessed the support you need, you will know if you are making a rational or emotional decision to leave. It's very easy to make a snap decision and then regret it. While it may be harder to stay and work through your reasons in the short term, it will be more rewarding in the long term.



A student told us...

One student told us that, having arrived from one of the remotest corners of the world, she found she had no friends and felt nothing in common with anyone in her halls or on her course. She was so homesick that she just wanted to get on a plane and go back home. We encouraged her to hang in and join some student societies in order to meet more people. By the end of the first year she felt sufficiently confident that she didn't even go home for the summer vacation.

How are you with meeting new people?

Meeting new people tends to happen quite naturally for most people in the first few days at university, but maybe you found it difficult or met the wrong people, or maybe it has all gone a bit quiet now. This could be an area that you need to work on in order to integrate and settle in happily at your university or college.

The first time you meet someone is very important. First impressions really do count. People can sense intuitively in the first thirty seconds of an encounter what basic impression they will have of the other person after fifteen minutes – or half a year. For instance, when people watch just thirty-second snatches of staff giving a lecture, they can assess each teacher's proficiency with about eighty per cent accuracy (Ambady, 1993). Almost the same level of accuracy has been found from brief observations in forty-four other studies, including one of people's interactions with bosses, peers, and subordinates (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1992).



Activity: Meeting new people

Take a few minutes to reflect upon the following questions:

- Who was the first person you met on your first day?
- What were your first impressions?

Some people find it particularly difficult to talk to strangers and will tend to avoid making new connections. This is known as a *social phobia*, but it can be overcome

14 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY

with perseverance. See also Chapter 4 on handling stress and developing relaxation techniques.

Here are some 'golden rules' for overcoming a fear of talking to new people:

- You have a perfect right to speak to strangers.
- It doesn't matter what they think of you, because you are still you.
- It doesn't matter how many rejections you get because eventually you will get into meaningful dialogue with someone.
- The more you do it, the better it will go and the more your fears will reduce.
- You are OK!

Not believing in the last of these 'golden rules' – you are OK – underpins our fears and phobias. If you can't truly believe it, try pretending that you are OK, acting a role, when you speak to someone. You may be surprised how quickly you begin to believe it! See also Chapter 3 on understanding the role of emotions – transactional analysis.



Activity: Overcoming social phobias

1. Put yourself in a social situation such as a common room at lunch time or student union bar in the evening. Avoid one that is so loud you can't talk or so quiet that you are feeling self-conscious.
2. Think about what you will say to open a conversation. Open questions such as 'how is it going?' are a good start (see also Chapter 3 on questioning and listening skills).
3. Look out for someone who looks friendly and is also on their own.
4. Try out your opening question and try to back this up with friendly questions, exploring what they told you and then perhaps sharing something of your experience.
5. Make sure you keep doing this until you get into a meaningful conversation.
6. Review how it went and try again another time – soon. Avoidance breeds more anxiety, so it's better to keep at it.

How well focused are you on other people?

You can improve the quality of the conversations you have with other people. Three critical factors are: energy, openness and mind focus. These largely determine the presence we can muster and maintain in any given interaction.



Activity: Presence assessment

1. Ask yourself the following questions to measure your current ability to offer others your full presence:
 - On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 indicating a mind homing in like a laser beam of pure attention and 1 being a state of total mind-meandering), what is **your focus level** right now?
 - On a scale of 1 to 10, what is your level of **open-mindedness and open heartedness** at this very moment towards other people?
 - On a scale of 1 to 10, what is your energy level right now, in terms of the reserves of **mental and physical vitality and vigour** you can bring to the moment?

2. Now consider how you can use these techniques:
 - You can perform the above simple self-awareness exercise at any time, mentally calculating your score in order to gauge your current level of presence.
 - Consider using it just prior to an interaction with others, initially to prepare yourself emotionally, then midway through an interaction to increase your mindfulness and alertness, and finally as you leave an interaction to assess your overall presence throughout.
 - Used with regularity, the assessment becomes a self-correcting mechanism. Conscious attention to self-awareness can increase your ability to get on with other people.

Orientating yourself to your studies

What is your attitude to work and study? How do you approach study? Although you may be new to higher education, you will know how you were at school or college.



Activity: How were you at school or college?

Did you:	Tick
attend classes regularly?	
participate enthusiastically when you were there?	
do all the work that was set?	
read to support the work in class?	
file your notes away neatly?	
revise thoroughly for exams?	

16 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY

Whatever you did before, it's now time to get organised for higher education. The emphasis will be much more on independent study, so being organised will be much more important – and if you don't get organised it is going to get very tough.

Contact time with staff may be much more limited in higher education than you were used to in school or college. The emphasis will probably be much more on you becoming an **independent learner**. Therefore knowing what you are supposed to be doing, when and where, and how to access the support facilities that you need, will become much more important.

Here are some ideas to consider:

- **Check your timetable** – sounds obvious, but you need to be in the right place at the right time. Not everything runs to timetable, so make sure you have a system for remembering what you should be doing such as a diary, personal organiser or mobile phone.
- **Full participation** – again it sounds obvious, but it's essential. It's usually true that failure rates correlate very closely to poor attendance patterns. You don't have to be especially gifted to pass, but you do need to turn up and to participate when you get there. Be there in mind and body!
- **Pre- and post-session work** – try to look upon pre- and post-session work as essential parts of the course and not as a nuisance or a 'bolt on'. Actual taught sessions in higher education tend to be relatively short, so post-session work will help to reinforce and extend what you have started to learn in a session and pre-session work or 'prep' will help you understand the next one.
- **IT facilities, library and bookshops** – get logged onto the computer system as soon as you can in order to access online information. Finding your way around the library and checking out the bookshops are all useful things to do in your first few days and will really help you when the pressure builds up later.
- **Notes / folders** – how are you with paper work? If it's all in a messy heap in the corner, it will be a serious setback to your studies. So in the first few days is a good time to buy some files and start to learn to love filing! Taught programmes go by very quickly, with new material to take on board every week. Filing things away is good for revision as it helps to refresh your memory about what you studied. In addition it's all there waiting for you when you need material in order to complete assessments.

**Activity: Getting organised for study**

1. Make a list of things you think you need to do over the next few days and weeks.
2. Keep the list in a place where you can see it and tick off things as you achieve or complete them. It's important to record your success!

Recognising your own motivation to learn, grow and develop

Motivation is simply about motive, for example why go to work? Why study? Why get up at all? It is clear that people do not all have the same motivations, but each of us has to find what motivates us in order to complete a course, get a job or whatever. The questions are: what is going to motivate you to succeed in your course, then in finding a job and in life as a whole?

Try completing the activity box below in order to find out what is going to motivate you and why, what the barriers to your achievement are and what new skills you might need to learn.

**Activity: Understanding your own motivation**

Write down your thoughts concerning the following:

1. What do you want to achieve during your time at university?
2. Why you want to achieve this?
3. What barriers do you think you might encounter in achieving your aims?

(Continued)

18 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY

(Continued)

4. What new skills you think that you will need to learn in order to overcome these barriers?

5. How anxious are you about your ability to achieve you aims? You can score your level of anxiety from 0 (low) to 10 (high) – please circle:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Identifying what you want to achieve and why at the start of your course is important, because there will always be days when you wonder what you are doing it all for. Many people also feel seriously anxious about their ability to complete their studies. If you are considering dropping out, and many students do, remembering why you are studying and your motivation to achieve can pull you through on dark days.

**Activity: Comparing your motivation to succeed**

1. Get someone else to complete the questions in the previous activity and then compare your answers. You might want to consider:
 - Are your answers the same or similar?
 - Do you think that they should be so?
2. Note down any differences which you feel are important.

Succeeding in higher education will require you holding onto your dream. Here are a few things you might want to try out:

- Try visualising yourself in a future time, perhaps at graduation or starting a new job. Paint the picture in your mind and put yourself clearly in it (there is more on visualisation in Chapter 2, Visualising your success).

- Try using affirmations. An affirmation is something we say to ourselves because we need to say it. It is a lie until we don't need to say it anymore. It normally starts with 'I', so your affirmation could be as simple as 'I know that I can succeed in my course'. Try repeating affirmations everyday until they become redundant. You'll know when that is!
- Try putting your affirmations on notes and put them up in your room to remind yourself what you are doing and why. This can seem quite daft when you are starting your course in the heady days of September or October, but by the dark days of November or February, they could be your salvation.
- Similarly, try putting up pictures or carrying them with you. Many people find friends, family or partners are an inspiration, or maybe it could be a car or a house you aspire to own. If you want to live in another part of the world, try carrying a picture of that place around with you to remind you of your dream.



A student told us ...

One student told us that his ambition was to be an accountant, but clearly this relied upon him completing his course successfully. He imagined himself in his new life, driving a black BMW. To remind himself, he put a picture of one from a magazine over the desk in his room.

Understanding your emotions in the developmental process

The science of moods

One of the biggest and perhaps least talked about factors in your development will be your ability to understand and work with your own emotions and those of others. At the core of this is the idea that, as human beings, we are 'hard wired' to respond to the behaviour and subsequent emotional reactions of other people. One person transmits signals that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular functions, sleep rhythms and even immune functions inside the body of another. In all aspects of social life, our physiologies intermingle.

In recent years a science of emotion has developed which is known as **emotional intelligence**. This has been defined as:

20 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY

The ability to express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion and regulate emotion in self and others (Mayer and Salovey, 1990).

and as:

The capacity for understanding our own feelings and those of others, for motivating others and ourselves whilst using leadership, empathy and integrity (Goleman, 1998: 82).

Why are our emotions a potential threat to our success?

Negative emotions can get in the way of our succeeding, not only in our studies but also in employment and life generally. When we are taken over by negative emotions, this is referred to as an **amygdala takeover**. This can be defined as an inappropriate and uncontrolled emotional response. It has four components:

- A trigger, which is a catalyst that stimulates because it generates an impulse.
- A strong emotion that is felt, such as anger, desire or frustration.
- An instant, impulsive, irrational or uncontrolled reaction that is usually inappropriate.
- A subsequent feeling of regret, after the feelings have passed.

When are we at risk of amygdala takeovers?

Predisposing factors	Triggers	Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiredness • Build-up of stress – ‘the last straw’ • Lots of effort into something • Alcohol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustration • Value conflicts • Personal criticism • Unfairness • Aggressive behaviour from others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shouting • Crying • Shutting down • Swearing • Physical violence • Physical violence



Activity: Amygdala takeover

Think about an amygdala takeover you have experienced.

1. What triggered it?
2. What was your response (that you regretted)?
3. Can you identify anything that made you predisposed to a takeover?

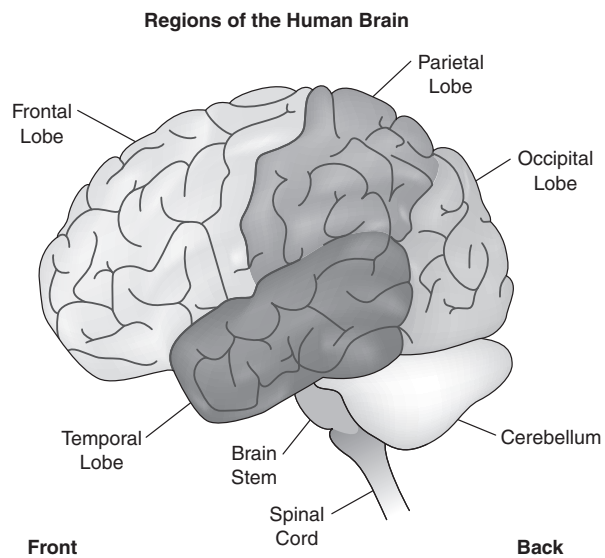


Figure 1.1 Regions of the human brain

Source: http://www.science.ca/images/Brain_Witelson.jpg

Emotions involve an orchestration of activity in circuits throughout the brain, particularly the frontal lobe, which houses the brain's executive facilities (such as planning); the amygdale, which is particularly active during the experience of negative emotions such as fear; and the hippocampus, which adjust actions to context (Davidson quoted in Goleman, 2003: 186–7).

What are emotional intelligence competencies?

Goleman (2001), has conducted research into competencies which can be observed when an individual is considered to be emotionally intelligent. He went on to develop the competencies framework in the next activity.



Activity: Understanding your emotional intelligence competencies

1. Review the four lists of emotional intelligence competencies ticking those you feel competent in. You are competent in a cluster, when you can tick the majority in the box.

Self (personal competence)	Other (social competence)
<p>Self-awareness</p> <p>Understand own strengths, weaknesses, needs and drives Recognise how feelings affect self Openness to feedback for development Self-confidence based on real strengths</p>	<p>Self-management</p> <p>Manage feelings and impulses Choose words carefully Avoid hasty judgements Behave in accordance with values Follow through on promises Open to new ideas and adaptable in the face of new situations Motivate self to achieve Take action to make the most of opportunities in the future</p>
<p>Social awareness</p> <p>Listen to others Understand others' perspectives Sense how others are feeling Understand how the organisation works Committed to helping others (e.g. Patients / Clients).</p>	<p>Relationship management</p> <p>Are skilled at winning people over Listen well, seek mutual Understanding and welcome sharing of information fully Foster open communication and stay bad news as well as good Handle difficult people and tense situations with diplomacy and tact Lead by example Model the change expected of others Balance a focus on task with attention to relationships Collaborate, sharing plans, information and resources</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Review the four lists of emotional intelligence competencies again, this time identifying your strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and recording your findings in the 'SWOT Analysis' below. 	

What do you see as your competencies? the emotional intelligence competencies?	What do you see as your weaknesses or areas for development in terms of the emotional intelligence competencies?
What opportunities do you see to develop your emotional intelligence competencies?	What threats do you see to you developing your emotional intelligence competencies, or barriers that may need to be overcome?

Self-efficacy and self-confidence

Self-efficacy is about our confidence in our ability to succeed, whether it is in higher education, employment or life generally. Spencer and Spencer (1993: 80) offer a more detailed definition of self-confidence:

Self-confidence is a person's belief in his or her own ability to accomplish a task. This includes the person expressing confidence in dealing with increasingly challenging circumstances, in reaching decisions or forming opinions, and in handling failure constructively.

Activity: Recognising your success competencies.

Spencer and Spencer (1993: 336) have also identified the following competencies that predict success at work and in life:

- **Achievement orientation** – the desire to attain standards of excellence and do better, improve performance.
- **Initiative** – acting to attain goals and solve problems before being forced to by events.
- **Information seeking** – digging deeper for information.
- **Conceptual thinking** – making sense of data and using algorithms to solve problems.
- **Interpersonal understanding** – hearing the motives and feelings of diverse others.
- **Self-confidence** – a person's belief in his or her own efficacy, or ability to achieve goals.
- **Impact and influence** – a person's ability to persuade others to his or her viewpoint.
- **Collaborativeness** – working effectively with others to achieve common goals.

(Continued)

24 HOW TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY

(Continued)

1. Review the above list of success competencies, ticking those you feel competent in.
2. Add your findings to the SWOT Analysis you made in the previous section.

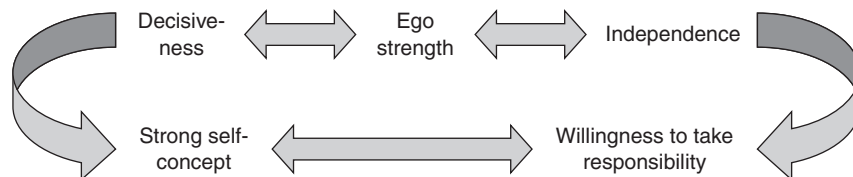


Figure 1.2 Self-confidence – self-perpetuating cycle

Source: Adapted from Spencer & Spencer, 1993, p. 81

Spencer and Spencer (1993) state that self-confidence is a component of most models of superior performers, although they also state that self-confidence may or may not be an independent variable: 'Is someone successful because they have self-confidence, or do they have self-confidence because they are successful?'. Both may be the case in a positive self-perpetuating cycle, as illustrated in Figure 1.2 below.

Building your self-confidence will mean doing new things and developing new skills. Whenever we step into new territory we are likely to feel anxious, but we develop confidence by keeping at it and pushing through. Your decision to enter higher education will inevitably mean doing new, different and sometimes difficult things, but the rewards will come from achieving them and from the increased self-confidence that you can take into employment and life.



Activity: Developing your self-confidence

1. Reviewing your SWOT analysis, think of something you could do to build your self-confidence. It may be something you would normally avoid doing or something you have been putting off.
2. Make a definite plan to something different in your life and then activate it.
3. How did it go? Make a note of what happened.

Follow-up activities

It is quite common in the first couple of weeks of a course not to have much academic work to do, so this may be a good time to invest some effort in what will be important for you over your time in higher education.



TIME FOR ACTION – CHECKLIST

Have you:

- made good efforts to get socially integrated?
- checked out your academic timetable and located rooms?
- started dealing with the information overload by setting up files etc?
- checked out the library and bookshop?
- logged onto the IT facilities?
- accessed any other support services that you will need?
- considered your motivation and how it compares to that of a friend?
- recognised the role of your own emotions and self-efficacy in your development and success?

Further reading

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2008) *Essential Study Skills: The Complete Guide to Success at University*, 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Cottrell, S. (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 2nd edition. Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Feldman, R. (2000) *Power Learning, Strategies for Success in College and Life*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

Goleman, D. (2003) *Destructive Emotions and How We Can Overcome Them*. London: Bloomsbury.

Jeffers, S. (1991) *Feel The Fear and Do it Anyway*. London: Arrow.

Lee-Davies, L. (2007) *Developing Work and Study Skills*. London: Thomson.

Pedler, M. and Boydell, J. (1999) *Managing Yourself*. London: Lemos and Crane.

Race, P. (1995) *Who Learns Wins*. London: Penguin.

Race, P. (2007) *How to get a good degree: making the most of your time at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Websites to look up

- Most universities and colleges of higher education will have pages on their own website with titles such as 'arriving at university', 'accommodation', 'dealing with homesickness', 'culture shock', etc.

- The National Union of Students also provides information at:

<http://www.nusonline.co.uk/info/freshers/>

- Information for international students is available from:

UKISA at: <http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/>



Time for review and reflection

This is your space to log your reflections on this chapter, to think about what you have learned it, how you will use it and what else you need to find out.

There will be more on reflection and why and how we can use it to learn, grow and develop in Chapter 2, in the sections on recognising strengths and planning personal development.

What were the key learning points of this chapter?

What are your strengths in the areas covered by this chapter?

What areas did you identify for development?

What have you learnt about yourself?

How will you use it?

What else do you need to learn or find out about in relation to this chapter?