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Davis, Sue (2008) Managing Part-time Study: a guide for undergraduates and postgraduates. Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (3). pp. 106-108.

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/3853>

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Managing Part-time Study: a guide for undergraduates and postgraduates

Caroline Gattrell

Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2006, 176pp. ISBN-13: 978-0335219391 (pbk)

This book, as the title suggests, is aimed at individuals who are considering taking, or are already undertaking, part-time study at undergraduate, postgraduate or doctoral level. The book arose as a result of the author's own experiences as a part-time student.

Whilst it contains practical information that numerous other 'study skills' publications offer (for example Burns & Sinfield, 2003; Cottrell, 2003; Payne & Whittaker, 2006), this is not its primary focus. The author acknowledges that more detailed guidance on assignment and dissertation writing and examination preparation needs to be sought elsewhere, such as Weyers & McMillan (2007) or Tracey (2002). However, it does explain the differences between, and distinct requirements of, undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral awards.

The strength of this book is the broader advice that is offered which is not commonly found in other texts on the subject. Powell (1999) could be said to be one of the nearest in focus and style. Advice and guidance ranges from whether to embark on a part-time course at all, to how to cope with the almost inevitable financial pressures. Much of the help offered is generic and can be applied to any level of study. It is particularly useful in that it directs the learner towards developing approaches that aid the management of the learning process. Sensible advice is offered on such matters as how to balance academic study alongside the challenging work and family commitments which are prevalent for mature part-time students. The book helps the reader to come to terms with the highs, lows and challenges of academic study; strategies on maintaining motivation are also explored.

The book commences by explaining different types of part-time study and the factors to be considered in choosing the right course. Also explained is what taught, flexible and distance learning modes of study entail. The reasons behind low completion rates are documented and, in relation to this latter point, this book, if used appropriately, should support the learner through difficult periods and significantly improve the prospect of successful completion.

Extensive advice is given on developing strategies to manage the learning process, including setting expectations and prioritising activities. Practical tips are concisely given on effective writing, referencing, the definition of plagiarism and how to avoid it, and how to cope with exams.

There is a particularly useful section on 'mid-term blues'. Most part- (and full-) time students will identify with this condition. It is these sections that part-time students may find most useful and take comfort from when things are not going to plan. Each chapter ends by summarising key points that act as easy references for a student wishing to distil the main points that have been raised.

What I particularly like, and is distinctive, is the frequent inclusion of student experiences in every chapter. These are taken from students studying at every level from undergraduate to PhD and from a variety of subject areas. These reinforce the text, adding an authenticity that enables the reader to relate more readily to the points being made. It is these experiences more than anything else that will support students in decisions they may take or strategies they may adopt with regard to their programme of study.

The final chapter asks the question 'What Next?' For many students, despite all the trials associated with part-time study, once the course has been completed, there is a sense of emptiness and loss. This chapter explores how to deal with those feelings and encourages students to reflect on whether or not to continue part-time study.

For the reader to get the best from this book, I would advise that it is read prior to commencing part-time study. It will then be an invaluable resource to dip into for reassurance and advice on specific issues. It would be a beneficial addition to the shelves of any university learning centre or library.

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