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This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document, This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Geography in Higher Education on 8 June 2022, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2022.2087214 and is licensed under Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 license:

**West, Harry, Cox, William, Alexander, Anoushka, Abzhaparova, Aida and Hill, Jennifer ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0682-783X (2023) How to Thrive when Studying Online. Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 47 (3). pp. 502-511. doi:10.1080/03098265.2022.2087214**

Official URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2022.2087214
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2022.2087214
EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/10882

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# How to Thrive when Studying Online

**Abstract**: The Covid-19 pandemic led to significant changes in higher education institutions, with a rapid pivot from on-campus to online teaching and learning. The move to predominantly online teaching resulted in a very different learning experience for many campus-based students, offering new opportunities and challenges. This Directions article is co-written by a student-staff partnership team and shares advice on how to thrive when studying online. The approaches developed to support online and blended learning during the pandemic are likely to be long-lasting, and so the top tips identified in this article have relevance to and beyond possible future disruptions to the higher education learning experience. We discuss four elements to support a successful and meaningful online learning experience: 1) Carefully managing time and balancing different tasks; 2) Staying motivated and rewarding yourself on completion of tasks; 3) Engaging and participating with online learning materials and classes, related to the effective use of online tools to study and stay in touch with peers and staff; 4) Engaging in professional development opportunities and seeking help and support when needed. Following the advice in this article will enable you to approach your studies with confidence, leading to a positive and meaningful learning experience.

**Keywords**: Online learning; Studying online; Student support; Study skills; Wellbeing

## Introduction

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a sudden shift to online learning in higher education institutions globally (Bartolic et al., 2021), marking the beginning of a new learning experience for many students studying at campus-based universities. At the time of writing, on-campus learning has resumed in many countries, but the teaching and learning approaches developed to support online and blended learning during the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to be longer-lasting (Whelehan, 2020; Thomas & Bryson, 2021). These approaches offer flexibility in teaching and learning over space and time, which can deliver benefits to diverse student cohorts. Studying effectively online, from

home or another space separate from campus, requires and develops a different skill set and more independence than traditional (and non-blended) campus-based learning. Challenges arise such as time management, motivation, and personal organisation, as well as how to keep in touch with staff and peers when working in physical isolation. Despite these challenges, working online and/or in a blended format will likely continue as a feature of higher education study and in the post-pandemic workplace. The top tips identified in this article therefore have relevance beyond learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, and other possible disruptions to the higher education learning experience, especially to students whose courses feature aspects of online or blended learning.

In the spirit of the JGHE Directions section (Healey and Hill, 2019), this article has been co-authored by a student-staff partnership team. We identify four key elements to support a successful and meaningful online learning experience: 1. Time management; 2. Maintaining motivation; 3. Engagement and participation; and 4. Professional development. We conclude by outlining a set of general tips for online study. These elements have been informed by the results of a wider research project, which investigated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the student learning experience in a geography department of a large teaching-oriented university in the UK. The data were collected at the end of the 2020/21 academic year from a student body who had limited previous experience of studying online. While the advice and student quotes noted in this article come from a project investigating full online learning, as we note above, the tips we explore will continue to be relevant to students studying geography on courses that operate a blended mode of delivery.

**1**. **Time Management**

While studying online, or in blended format, in order to progress learning and assessment tasks, you will be required to navigate various digital platforms and manage distractions that come from working at home or other non-campus spaces. Time management is therefore a very important aspect of online and blended learning (Thomas et al., 2021). The key element to good time management when studying online is to create a schedule and develop a routine. Research shows that creating a routine and planning your week increases your personal productivity (Arnold & Pulich, 2004). Whilst this is good practice for everyday life, it is especially important when learning online from home, when you are physically separated from fellow students and staff. This need comes from decreased social contact and fewer 'checkpoints', such as the start and end of timetabled lectures or visiting social areas between sessions with friends. Attending the university campus can provide checkpoints, but when studying online from home the days can blur into each other and cause you to lose track of what you are trying to achieve. The students who contributed to our research project clearly highlighted that time management, as a skill, is vital to studying online.

*"It can be harder to keep up with the work we should be doing [when working online from home]."*

*"Time management helps so much, not just with work but with mental health in stressful times, knowing you have time to spare and don't have to stress about rushing."*

When asked to provide advice for their peers to enhance their time management studying online at home, the students commented:

*"Make a schedule and stick to it every week. Plan when you are going to watch each*

*module's recorded lecture and when you are going to do other tasks, like directed learning or pre-session tasks."*

*"Find a quiet and comfortable space to learn and set yourself a target of work to get through in a particular time period. Use all the relevant resources provided by the lecturers."*

Time management is vital to studying effectively online because it helps you not only with completing work to deadlines, but also with relieving potential associated stress. We recommend the following steps are taken to manage your time effectively when studying online:

1. Don't overwhelm yourself by trying to complete multiple tasks at once. At the start of each teaching week, make it a habit to access the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to identify what timetabled (synchronous) online sessions you have and what tasks you need to complete in preparation for them. Planning and organising a learning pathway through each week will help you to avoid getting lost in tasks and forgetting when they are due. Allocate time when you feel most productive to work on each task throughout the week and stick to your schedule as much as you can, otherwise one task may take over your time and you might then fall behind with other work, increasing your stress.
2. Avoid a build-up of asynchronous learning tasks. There are often tasks that need to be done in advance of timetabled (synchronous) classes. They usually directly relate to the topics covered in the session, and so not completing them may hinder your learning. They might also be reflective activities after a synchronous session, allowing you to consolidate your understanding. It is a good idea to make a weekly to-do list and, as discussed above, allocate time for completing tasks in your schedule. Follow tutor guidance on how long it should take you to

undertake each pre- or post-session task, and if this is not made clear to you ask your tutor how long these tasks should take. You can then fit the tasks into your pockets of free time. Try not to push these tasks down your to-do list because they do not have a set time for working through them. Leaving tasks to build up increases stress and may leave you feeling overwhelmed.

3. When planning your week, it is important to build in time away from your studies and the computer screen. This is mainly due to physical health reasons, such as the more sedentary nature of online learning, with less physical movement between study spaces, and the increased time looking at computer screens. It is also important to take regular breaks for your mental health as, when studying online at home, it can become very difficult to get away from the computer and you can be drawn into working for long periods. Leave your study room and house if you are able to access fresh air. This will create a physical and mental divide between your space of study and the same space of everyday life.
4. Build time into your schedule to allow for problems you might encounter with tasks you are working on, or if something unplanned needs completing. Remember, it can take longer to ask questions and receive answers from your tutors and peers when studying from home. Allocating extra time will allow you to resolve issues, instead of having to use time allocated for other tasks. If nothing unplanned arises, you can use this spare time for an extra break, or for an existing project or assessment.
5. Check your student emails and announcements via your VLE regularly. You might choose to connect your email and calendar to your personal device or smartphone. This provides you with access to important updates quickly. As you

meet face-to-face less often with online and blended learning, important communications from your tutors will most likely be delivered electronically, and these can have immediate action points for you. By checking emails or VLE announcements regularly, you will be able to act upon tasks quickly and keep yourself informed about the progress of your courses. However, as we have discussed above, it is as important for you to take breaks from your emails as it is to step away from your studies.

**2. Maintaining Motivation**

Motivation levels have a relationship with productivity. People who are motivated and excited about what they are working on can carry out tasks to the best of their ability (Ganta, 2014). Whilst being motivated is vital in any working/learning environment, it is especially important when studying online from home. This is because there are not the same motivators that exist with on-campus learning experiences, such as lunch breaks with friends, groupwork chats, or unexpected meetings in communal study areas. As such, there is much more emphasis on developing your own self-motivation. In our survey, students commented freely about improving self-motivation, saying:

*"Find ways to stay motivated, I rewarded myself for each task."*

Self-motivation is important to studying effectively online because it helps you to keep focused on the tasks you need to complete. We recommend the following steps to keep yourself motivated with online study:

1. Treat learning online the same as you would learning on-campus. This means holding yourself to the same routine and standards, such as ensuring you are ready to study in a designated space and are suitably dressed, having all the learning resources you need, and logging in on time. It can be very easy to let

these important aspects of online learning slip, as you do not have to be physically present and you are not visible to others unless you turn your camera on.

2. Related to the above, it is important to create a suitable and comfortable study space at home, if this is where you will be studying. Ideally, this space should be located away from both distractions and areas where you normally relax. By creating a separation between your study and living space, it can reduce the feeling of never getting away from work and increase your self-motivation and time management. However, it might not always be possible to have a separate study space, away from your bedroom for example. This is where creating yourself a schedule and being strict with your time management regarding when you start and finish studying for the day is critical.
3. Create ‘mini-motivators’ throughout the day by rewarding yourself for completing tasks. These could be things from tea breaks, a phone call with a friend, or a quick gaming session once a task has been completed. These activities help to keep you motivated by giving you time to relax and refresh following a task. Remember to build these breaks and rewards into your schedule.
4. Look after yourself. Staying healthy will help to drive your motivation. Try to eat well, get enough sleep and take regular exercise. Where you are able, spend time with your friends, family and pets to reduce any study anxiety.

**3. Online Engagement and Participation**

A large part of the university experience revolves around participating in activities, both academically and socially. During periods of online study, away from campus, it can be

harder to do this. However, it is important to try and engage with and participate in (online) activities with other students and student societies, as well as making use of additional learning opportunities with staff, especially those offering formative feedback.

***Studying with Others***

It is important to contribute to discussions with your tutors and peers in online sessions. Learning is a two-way, social process, requiring you to engage with others if your understanding is to be optimised. Discussion is a very important part of the learning process as it allows you to process knowledge rather than just receive it (Hill and West, 2020). In face-to-face teaching, it is easy for discussion to develop, as there are several people in the room. However, whilst it is possible for there to be several people present in an online space, it can be more of a challenge to generate discussion because it is harder to "read the room" and you cannot always see/hear individuals' reactions. In our survey, students made some suggestions for how both staff and students can encourage discussion and participation in online sessions:

*"The lack of camera and mic use in online sessions was a detriment to our learning experience. If students use them, it will make working together easier and more enjoyable."*

*"Stay in touch with people on the course in group chats [on social media platforms] and help each other out."*

As highlighted by the students, it is important to create and maintain effective working relationships online. Therefore, we recommend you take following steps to improve your collaborations whilst studying online:

1. Attend timetabled online sessions and try to use your microphone in addition to the chat function. Using your mic tends to generate more discussion as people can respond to comments quickly. Often, when discussion occurs through the chat box, points can become jumbled as there is no flow to the conversation, making it hard to follow. Points can also be missed by the tutor and by yourselves as students. The microphone also allows you to hear the tone/style of a comment and reduces possible misinterpretation.
2. Try to use your webcam, where bandwidth allows, in smaller group classes. Doing so provides a well-needed reminder that humans are on the other side of the screen and makes learning more personal. Using your camera facilitates collaboration and generates a sense of learning community. It can move your session from the lecturer as leader toward active learning in partnership. Using your camera also helps you to practice your online presentation skills in preparation for further study or employment. If you are in a class and nobody else has their camera on, why not be the first! Often, if one or two people have their cameras on in class, the rest of the group will join in – providing not only learning benefits, but also added social value for everyone. You might blur your background or sit with your back against a wall if you feel uncomfortable to show more of your surroundings.
3. You might form an online study group with a small number of other students. This provides multiple benefits not only to your learning and skillset development, but also to your mental health. Online study groups offer connection to your fellow students and provide a means to replicate the benefits of working together in study areas on campus. They allow you to develop social relationships and confidence when studying online with your peers. For an

effective study group, we recommend having no more than four or five students involved and to meet frequently (such as once or twice a week).

4. When studying in groups online, it is important to be structured with progressing a project, as there are fewer opportunities to catch up informally compared with face-to-face groupwork. To navigate groupwork in an online context we recommend you schedule regular meetings so that all team members know when you are meeting and what needs to be achieved. You might use Doodle Poll or Teams Calendars to do this. Also, make the most of online instant chat functions (such as WhatsApp, Messenger or Teams) to communicate with each other. These methods can be useful to help each other when studying outside of meetings, such as having a quick video call to clarify an issue. The most important element with online groupwork is to remain in touch and to keep supporting each other.

The skills outlined above will be relevant post-university, in the workplace, where you may be working on projects with team members who are on site at different times to you (flexi-remote working) and who may not be physically present all the time.

### *Seeking Feedback*

Feedback is vital to learning as it allows you to learn from mistakes and to improve future work (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Schartel, 2012). Working with your tutors to receive and act on feedback online might be different to the opportunities available on-campus. When studying online or in blended mode it can be harder to have quick conversations with the lecturers around teaching sessions, or to visit them in their office to receive feedback or ask questions. Tutors will often outline at the start of their courses the different ways you can receive feedback and support whilst learning online.

This might include contact via email, scheduled online drop-ins, or short one-to-one online meetings. Making the most of these opportunities will support your learning.

Whilst it is important to seek feedback from staff, you should also seek feedback from your peers. When learning online, the peer support network that naturally exists during face-to-face teaching is reduced because you do not necessarily have the same level of interactions with your cohort as when studying on campus (in lectures, seminars and study areas). To maintain this support, reach out to your fellow students online via various means such as course chats and groups. This will enable you to maintain and develop your study relationships.

**4. Professional Development when Studying Online**

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations and professional bodies now offer a greater volume of online events and activities, such as webinars and conferences. The online nature of such events arguably makes them more accessible than when they were held face-to-face as the cost of travel is removed and attendance fees are often reduced. These events provide you with an opportunity to benefit from the experience and skills you have developed through studying online and allow you to engage with the subject beyond your degree.

Online working will continue to be a part of professional life into the future. Many job descriptions now require applicants to have good digital skills, as there might be more remote working utilising platforms like Teams to connect with colleagues (Pham, 2021). Consequently, developing good online practice during your time at university will make you more employable post-graduation. As a student, putting into practice your skills in online communication, self-regulation and assessment, you will

be developing a number of technical and soft skills such as digital literacy and emotional intelligence, building transferable skills for the workplace.

## 5. General tips for Studying Online

### *Backing up your Work*

When studying fully online or as part of a blended course, you are more reliant on data storage systems, due to a reduction in paper-based working. However, these systems can corrupt as well as experience failure. If this happens to you whilst studying, and you have not created a backup, your hard work will likely be lost. To avoid losing your work when studying online, it is vital that you back it up. Create additional copies of your work and store them in a secure location. In the past, this process usually involved creating copies of files and storing them in a different physical location. However, it is now possible to save your work to cloud storage systems, such as OneDrive. These systems might be provided by your university and they are very useful as they automatically save your files as you are working. They are secure and can only be accessed by you or people you have shared files with. We recommend that you make use of cloud storage systems if you have access to them. It is worth backing up your work at least once a week as a matter of course. These techniques are good practice for your studies generally, protecting you from any disruption to your learning. They can also be usefully continued into the workplace.

### *Information Technology (IT) Issues*

Studying online in itself requires use of Information Technology (IT). Whilst IT systems generally operate trouble free, problems can occur. Do not keep quiet and struggle with IT issues - contact a relevant member of staff (module support staff or IT

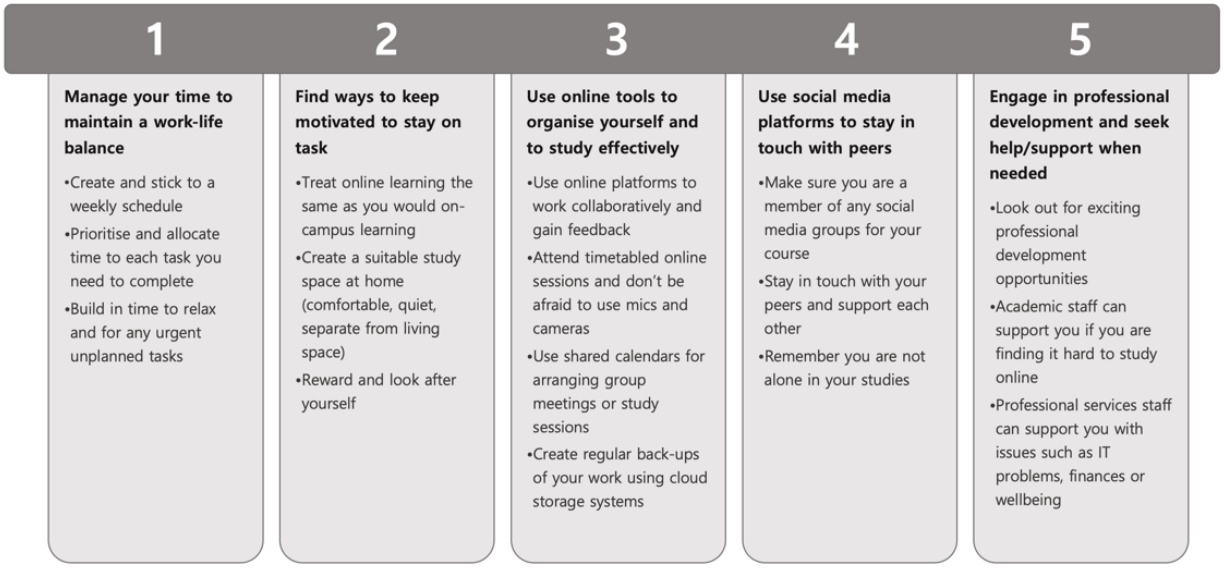
services) as soon as possible. They will be able to work with you to resolve the problem and get you back to your studies as soon as possible. Asking for help not only reduces stress, but will also save you time in the long run.

### *Seeking Help and Support*

It is important to ask for help in general with online and blended learning, as you would do for campus-based learning. When working online, academic and professional services staff are still available to support you. Do not suffer in silence – reach out to the university library services, wellbeing teams, career services, and financial teams etc. as you need help. You are not alone with your online studies. You have your friends, family, peers, course representatives, tutors and a host of university professional staff who are there to support you.

## 6. Conclusion

Learning online can be challenging, but it can also be an enjoyable and flexible experience, allowing you to work at times that suit your strengths, as well as giving you control over more elements of your learning. Following the advice in this article will allow you to approach your online and blended studies with confidence, leading to a positive and meaningful learning experience and improved outcomes (Shoemaker, 2010). You are doing a degree to build yourself as an individual. It is your learning journey and, as you learn, your confidence will grow. As your confidence develops you should have greater motivation to succeed, and a positive feedback cycle develops. The greatest motivator throughout your learning should be the end result of finishing your studies and graduating, preparing you for a fulfilling career and life. Based on the top tips discussed in this article we conclude by presenting five golden rules that will help you study effectively online as part of fully remote or blended courses (Figure 1).




By adopting the practices outlined in this article, you should feel more prepared to learn online or in a blended mode, and to make the most of the opportunities these approaches offer to your life-long learning.

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**Figure 1.** Five Golden Rules for Effective Online Study.