



**MAKERERE UNIVERSITY**  
**DEPARTMENT OF OPEN AND**  
**DISTANCE LEARNING**

**STUDYING AT A DISTANCE**

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**Developing study skills as a distance learner**

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The write-up mainly looks at the challenges of a destined and practicing distance learner and offers practical advice on how to study meaningfully given the challenges already identified. The writer also shares skills on how to read effectively. He draws a lot from the experience gathered while he was a student on the Bachelor of Education External program. Nice reading.

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## Introduction

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In this paper, we examine what distance education is; characteristics of a distance learner; and what it takes to study at a distance. We examine the advantages accruing to this mode of study and also explore helpful study skills for distance learners.

Once you qualify to join Makerere University as a student, you need to remember that the University is an institution whose main purpose is the pursuit of knowledge. It exists to help individuals to develop their intellect to the highest possible level (at Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral, and Post-Doctoral level). As an individual, you now have the freedom to research and discover as much as your intellect and interests permit. This fact has serious implications for a Distance Learner (or an 'External Student' as he/she is commonly referred to at Makerere University) whose interaction with the facilitators is limited compared to the on-campus/conventional/fulltime/internal students. This paper aims at assisting learners with some basic study skills for distance learning.

## What is Distance Education?

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This is a mode of study where the student is separated in space and time from his/her tutor and the institution but keeps in close touch with specially formulated study materials. The material is made in such a way that it

is interactive and talks by itself.

Although this mode of study often violates the on-campus semester programmes, it rhymes with the academic expectations in terms of quality, cumulative grade point averages and graduation load. In most cases the examinations set for internal students do rhyme with those for external students where courses cut across.

## Who are the Distance Learners?

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This depends on the category and the program. Makerere University offers four distance learning (external) programmes through the Department of Open and Distance Learning. Of recent, the majority of learners on the B.Com./Ext and CYP programmes are S.6 leavers and thus younger than their counterparts on B.Ed./Ext and B.Sc./Ext. Ambitions and motivations of the two groups are quite different. Even the B.Com./Ext students who take four years to complete their studies eventually find themselves starting to work even before completing their studies and this greatly changes their way of behaviour and life expectations. They mature in thinking. As adult learners, their learning patterns certainly change. Adults look at education as a process, as a system and as a goal. Distance learners therefore attend a planned process of purposeful learning. Some students already have good jobs, but

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they still find themselves in need of a degree. Such students are results-oriented, target-seeking and aim at achieving certain life goals.

Distance Learners differ from conventional learners in that these mature students bring with them experience and a wealth of knowledge. They also have different intentions and focus towards their education. Their ways of learning are certainly very different. Such learners need special care and understanding.

### **How can one fit in this category of learners?**

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Experience has shown that distance learners behave maturely and are professional in what they say and do. Some of them come to the University while already engaged in a profession, which demands a certain code of behaviour. For instance, while on-campus students may look at striking as an option to solve their problems, distance learners usually dialogue with the administrators to find solutions to any issues that may arise.

### **Typical characteristics of a distance learner**

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Although this varies from programme to programme, they include the following characteristics, among others:

- Adults (aged from 20 years and above )
- Men and women

- Single, married, divorced, widowed, mothers or pregnant women
- Rural- or urban-based
- Workers in various organisations
- Students with different learning styles
- New to distance education mode of study
- Students with varying family pressures, e.g. unsupportive spouses, dependant parents, jittery fiancées, et cetera
- Worried about work and money since many sponsor themselves
- Students who lack books and library facilities in some of their home areas
- Unable to find own space to study
- Cannot afford to hire/purchase equipment, facilities and study materials
- In isolation while away from the main campus
- Sometimes unable to find transport to get to tutorials or face-to-face programmes
- Lack confidence due to the fact that at times they are seen as 'second rate' students
- Have low levels of reading ability due to too much pressure at home/workplace
- Too busy to attend tutorials, tests and even at times examinations.

One wonders, if they have the above challenges, how can they pursue

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education and why do they choose to study through the distance mode?

### **What does one benefit by studying at a distance?**

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This study programme is packaged in such a way that it allows one to work and study at the same time; it is therefore time conscious. Distance learners are offered interactive study materials for the courses they take. Assignments that provide a catalyst for self-study are done after careful research.

Distance education mode assists students who live too far from these institutions to access education. Distance learning does not require commuting; in the case of Makerere University, students are programmed to study for few weeks and do the rest of the reading at their work places or homes.

A student is offered up to five years to complete a three-year course and six years to complete a four-year course. This means one can complete most of the classes at his/her convenience. Most of the classes are asynchronous, which means you don't have to attend a lecture at a particular time and place. You can do your coursework assignments during off-peak hours at work or from home.

Distance learning is a worldwide phenomenon whose products are recognised locally, nationally and internationally. In Uganda, there are very many students undertaking certificate, diploma, undergraduate

and postgraduate studies online from renowned universities in the world. Therefore, with distance education, one can live anywhere, and study from anywhere while pursuing the education of his/her choice. Makerere is in the process of starting e-learning programmes which shall reduce heavily the burden of students having to foot bills to come to the main campus to access services. They shall be served online wherever they shall be.

The experts who facilitate on distance learning programmes offer a lot of information to the learners especially through the motivating assignments and by identifying links to Internet resources relevant for the courses being handled. Therefore students end up gaining a lot of information that is shared online by many distinguished researchers and writers.

This mode of study reduces stress and increases satisfaction on the side of the learners. The pace of learning is determined by the learner: when he/she feels stressed, he/she can carry forward some courses, request for temporary withdrawal from the programme to first analyze his/her readiness to learn then resume or even simply stay put (repeat).

Distance learning programmes address physical accessibility issues that some people with limited mobility encounter when taking traditional classes. You don't have to worry about gaining access to a classroom or sitting on uncomfortable desks. Instead, you can use your comfortable furniture in

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your home while enjoying free movement and a chance to further your education.

to reorganise yourself under new time demands. Keep a diary for appointments and proper programming.

### Let us take note of the following painful but factual statements

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- You need to note that distance learning is very different from the conventional way of studying (in terms of age, expectations, demands, motivation to learn, and teaching/learning strategies).
- You have to study on your own for the bulk of the time. You meet your tutors for a period of only two weeks in face-to-face sessions and they leave you with assignments to hand in on predetermined deadlines.
- Yet, as you know, you already have a full life you are living. You may be working, raising children, and have a demanding social life. The young need to enjoy the city while the working adults already have too much on their desks waiting.
- At Makerere University, in the second face-to-face session of any given semester, timed tests are administered to gauge the level of knowledge acquisition in the courses on offer. The tests contribute a sizeable percentage to your course work assessment. This in itself demands serious revision.
- As a distance learner, you will have to exercise self-control more than ever before. You have, therefore,

### Things to do

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Therefore, as you enrol on a distance learning programme, it is imperative to take note of the following guidelines:

- a) Have a goal and a purpose in life. For example, if you are above 35 years, think of what made you to go to school at an advanced age. The reason you give to yourself will be the motivating goal. If you are between 20 and 25 years, realize that education is an investment that needs serious attention to produce worthwhile returns.
- b) Have a goal and purpose as you study too. Studying is not all about attending classes but one must set personal expectations. What do I want to find out by studying a course/subject X?
- c) Interact with your colleagues. NEVER study in isolation. We have cases of students who hide to read and return when a particular examination is ending or has ended. Some do private study and do coursework assignments without any consultation and end up misfiring questions. Do work wisely with colleagues.
- d) Do not distance yourself from lecturers/tutors; they will

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determine your grade. Feel free to call your tutors for consultation. As a distance learner, you might need his/her support for you to understand certain concepts.

- e) Have a positive attitude and weigh your expectations (not too high or very low). Do self-examination and set social and academic standards you can achieve. It is not helpful to aim at a first class degree yet you know you are not prepared to work for it. Neither should you aim for a pass (gentleman's) degree. That is killing yourself softly!
- f) Learn to manage your time to balance work and education demands. Prioritise all activities and do what you must do at a particular time.
- g) Do not open books to read when your moods are wanting. Everything has its own time.
- h) Make use of the book-bank, library and read widely (do not rely only on notes got from class or materials given).
- i) Attend lectures without missing and do not photocopy old notes.
- j) Make use of ICT facilities to find new knowledge. Avoid going back the way you came.
- k) Form study groups and discuss topical issues related to your studies.
- l) Make use of every opportunity that comes your way as long as it shall lead you to achieving your

academic dreams and has no social costs attached.

### **What to expect from course facilitators?**

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As adult distance learners, remember that the persons who teach on distance learning programmes are more of facilitators than lecturers or teachers. Therefore, their tasks are mainly to:

- Create an atmosphere that is friendly and tension-free for each person to enjoy the subject matter being handled.
- Give freedom to students to determine what they feel they should learn, i.e. involve learners but direct them into the correct action. There is no purpose for a facilitator to repeat what every student knows. Facilitating is driven by question-and-answer approach.
- Handle the psychological aspects; that is to say, he/she observes and responds in a counselling manner. This is why you will find these facilitators more friendly, encouraging, and willing to help.
- Write study materials that support the learner to find out more information through further reading. These materials continue serving in his/her absence when the student is at a distance, studying on his own.

NOTE: Production of study materials costs the Department money and

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since this money comes from the fees that students pay, no student is offered study materials unless he/she pays up 60% of tuition in addition to all the functional fees.

### **How then can a student develop meaningful notes in the process of reading?**

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I wish to draw lessons from personal experience as alumni of the External Program 1999-2002 who went through the Bachelor of Education (External) programme and came out with a first class degree. During my period of studies, I had many challenges which generally are typical of a distance learner and thus I find the following tips handy for you as well. Let us explore them.

- Have a purpose and be organised. You need to be clear about your purpose for taking notes; for example, is it for research, for assignments or for examinations? Once you have known the purpose, stick to that and be consistent in your study programmes.
- Understand what is being said or what you are reading before you embark on taking notes. At times during lectures we find ourselves writing whatever is said and thus develop a lot of notes that at times end up confusing us. Write key points only and be as attentive as humanly possible. Lecturer method of teaching requires a student to be attentive and avoid

issues that distract him/her from capturing key points raised by the lecturer.

- While you are taking notes from a given reference, write down the author, the title of the book, edition, place of publication and date at the top of your page. This will assist you later as you write your assignment or research paper, or to make reference and to write your bibliography. This is what others term as academic writing.
- Give yourself plenty of space in your notes so that when you revise you can make additional or marginal notes. A student who is orderly shall attend lectures and take notes, and then he/she will visit the library to read on the same topic to enhance on the material delivered by the facilitator/tutor. That is where spacing becomes helpful.
- Try to understand a point first and then select a key word. Extract the main sense of a passage and put it in your own words. This is usually done to avoid plagiarism (taking some one's work, ideas or words and using them as if they are yours). This is academic theft and is punishable.
- Your notes should be interactive. Make space for writing your own opinions and what you think within what you are reading. At University level, most of your lecturers would expect you to

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express your own opinion not mere duplication of what has been offered in the materials offered or in class notes.

- Consult colleagues to be sure that the approach you are taking is in consonance with the course objectives.
- Do not heavily rely on only what is provided in class but look for relevant books in book shops and purchase some of them. A learner must have enough reference materials at all times. Remember, you are an authority in your field and once you get a degree, much will be expected of you. Reference materials will come in handy.

### NOTE:

The majority of distance learners in Uganda are employed in professional jobs or are involved in subsistence farming and/or fishing. The majority enroll in distance education in order to obtain a qualification and/or a promotion. They want to update their knowledge and skills. Some enroll in distance education courses with the attitude that distance education is easy because they can learn at their own pace; however, distance learning requires self-discipline and self-management in order to realize targets.

Unfortunately, some students drop out or do not graduate. Also, some lecturers believe that once you choose to study at a distance, you do not need extra support. Sensitization and exposure to distance education

methods will help students and lecturers to alter their attitudes towards distance education in a land that cherishes face-to-face interactions and on-campus instruction. In my view, what a student needs is simply focus and discipline. It is possible to run all your errands and still perform very well academically. Others have done it; it is possible with you too.

### Effective Reading Skills

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I wish us to remind ourselves that, when we read there is a degree of internalisation that takes place. Recalling also has levels ranging from 100% to 01%. Therefore we need to be careful not to simply read for the sake of it but read tactfully and objectively. As a learner on a distance education programme, you should expect to spend more than 80% of your study time reading. Therefore you need to improve your reading skills. There will be limited opportunity to meet tutors as already mentioned above (during face-to-face sessions) for interaction and raising difficult questions for you to receive assistance. Do not expect to cover the entire syllabus through face-to-face sessions.

I find the following steps helpful as you revise for academic purposes:

We begin by surveying a book, meaning that if you want to read a book you have picked from your reading list, we begin by obtaining a general impression of the book by

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looking at the content page, preface and introduction. This process creates a general impression on the kind of material expected from the book.

Equally important, before you begin to read, ask yourself a question, "Why am I reading and what am I expecting to learn?" You will then obtain a purpose for reading that particular book or journal. Is it for assignment, for general reading, for literature review? Do not read a book because you saw a course mate with the same title, maybe it was leisure reading that had no serious academic pursuit.

The next step is actually to read the book, no one will ever understand a written concept unless he/she creates time to sit and read the book. This is why we go to school. Many of us start talking of how we are busy and cannot find time to read. Remember, no one will ask you to read. This course demands that you develop self-discipline and regulate your activities if you are to achieve meaningful results.

Once you read information, there shall come time to recall. This means you should go over what you have read and make notes on it. Recalling seeks to find out if the information that was conceptualized and stored can be retrieved.

Finally we may opt to review the material soon after first learning. This helps to ensure that the memory traces are deepened and strong to result in long-term memory.

### What to avoid while reading

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The following are pieces of advice on what to avoid in the process of reading:

- Don't stop to recall after every paragraph or two. It interrupts the flow of what you are reading
- Don't wait too long to recall if a section is long.
- Don't underline long passages; mark only key ideas.
- When bothered by troubling thoughts, first relax your brains and refresh yourself, then start all over again.
- Read to understand not to cram. University-level education requires analysis of information.
- Avoid using colleagues' notes to start reading; you may get distracted, disoriented and confused. Compare notes after revision.
- Do memory exercises before and after reading.
- Read like you know nothing, avoid reading to prove or disprove. You just end up getting confused in the process.

The list can be improved upon as you read further!

While in the reading session, please carry with you:

- the course outline and the reference list
- the course objectives and the relevant assignments

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- the course study modules for the semester (You can't afford to miss copies of these)
- enough stationery and writing materials
- some water to keep your brains fresh and smart
- a dictionary to assist you interpret words appropriately; do not shy away thinking that people will wonder; leave them to wonder as you move forward
- avoid carrying distracters such as music gargets, big and warm coats, nail cutters, et cetera
- A laptop if you have one, so that you type whatever you read. If it is connected to Internet that boosts your chances of getting more information.

### **Working on Coursework Assignments**

As a distance learner it is imperative to read bearing in mind that, coursework is a learning tool in distance education mode of study and not a mere search for marks. This is supposed to be done bearing in mind that they have to be marked and feedback produced before sitting examinations. (What usually happens? Some students delay to submit and so the entire feedback exercise is delayed). This trend is history; together we must fight this bad habit and target good practices that yield positive results.

Write a coursework after thorough research and wide consultations with

colleagues and relevant books you're your handwriting is ineligible, you better type and proofread your work; the examiner is not supposed to proofread your work. He wants flowing information.

Follow the set deadlines to avoid unnecessary expenses and frustrations. Students who submit their coursework assignments outside the deadline often end with missing results because it is common for tutors to misplace single assignments.

Therefore, as you research for course work, you would be helped if you follow the following five steps, depending on the nature of the task.

- Analyse: Please understand what is required. You will lose marks by wondering off the topic and writing what you are not required to write.
- Find: Be sure of where to find information. Refer to the course outline for reference lists. Ask tutors when you are not very sure.
- Use: After reading, do not be surprised if you find that you have more information than you either need or can need or would need later. Therefore prioritise your reading and you will be able to avoid reading superfluous material.
- Take notes: Assuming that you are preparing for an assignment or simply broadening your knowledge, the notes you take should be relevant to the task at hand.

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- Organise: In order to effectively use your notes for the assignment or for the exams, organise and review your notes soon after you have made them and sort them in terms of introduction, body and conclusions.
- Student number
- Program (e.g., BEd/External)
- Subject code & title (e.g. CSK 1101 - Communication Skills, BCS 1101 Business Communication Skills).
- Name of tutor/lecturer
- Set deadline & date of submission
- Question(s) attempted
- Contact (mobile Telephone and/or e-mail)

### **Writing up Your Work for Submission**

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In writing presentable work, do the following:

- Write an essay plan/mind map/table of contents
- Draft the essay
- Revise
- Edit
- Write the final version
- Submit your work to Room 12 (BEd), Room 3 (BCom), Room 17 (CYP) and Room 15 (BSC)
- Ensure that your card signed as evidence of having submitted your work.
- Please guard your card jealously.

On the cover page of your work do not forget to write the following details:

- Name
- Registration number

For BEd students check with Room 5 for records of your coursework marks and receive back marked scripts from RM 12. For BCom check Room 3 for the same, BSc Room 15 and CYP Room 17.

Once you find discrepancies in your records, please involve the course coordinator, programme coordinator, tutor in charge or Head of Department to resolve the problem.

Our task as external students is to see what nobody sees and think thoughts that no one has thought and make what nobody has made. In this way we shall be unique and looked for wherever we are for service.

WE BUILD FOR THE FUTURE.