

6 Organizing yourself

In this section:

- identify the amount of time you may have to spend working on a module
- identify your main activities
- break down activities into tasks
- prioritize effectively
- relate tasks to time
- make action plans

Time management

Time management is an essential skill to develop for distance learning — you are obliged to take responsibility for your own work, ensuring that it arrives at WEDC by stated deadlines.

Through the discussion of simple time management techniques, this section will help you to use time effectively. Effective time management can be broadly defined, but in this section, we will focus in particular on the need to manage individual tasks arising from your studies.

Study time

It is difficult to manage time without knowing for how long you will be studying. We are often asked how much study time is needed to complete a module. Unfortunately, there is no single answer that applies to all students, as people learn at different rates and some may have more background knowledge of a subject than others.

We offer the following as a guide:

Study of module notes, self-assessment questions and additional resources:

50-65 hours

Supplementary reading:

10-25 hours

Assignments:

40-50 hours total

Each 15 credit module is of a fixed duration aligned with the University's semester timetable so you will need to plan your study accordingly.

Research Dissertation is a 60 credit module which is studied over a period of several months, with a total estimated study time of 450-600 hours.

Key stages in managing time

The following key stages will help you manage your time:

Be aware...

...of all of your commitments
— study, social, family...



Be realistic

- What time demands do these make?
- What order of priority are they in?

Make plans

- What actually needs to be done?
- When does it need to be done by?
- When will you do it?
- How will you do it?

Evaluate your progress

- How are you getting along?
- Are you on schedule?
- What can you do swiftly and efficiently to get back on schedule?

Time management revolves around one essential rule: that time is not allocated randomly.

You must actively distribute time among your activities.



Be aware

What broad activities take up your time?

One key to successful time management is to be aware of all the demands upon your time. Only then can you plan time around them. When considering such demands you should include course requirements, spare time activities, work and family commitments as well as time for eating, sleeping, shopping and so on.



Make a list of your key activities. Try to express these activities in seven or eight key areas. This will help keep the list manageable.

What do these activities involve?

Once you have identified all of the demands on your time, try breaking them down into smaller tasks. For example, when planning a coursework assignment, the main activity can be broken down into clearly distinct tasks as follows:

- **Think** — time to develop an overview of the assignment, establishing aims and objectives.
- **Plan** — time to draft an outline of the assignment, what to say at the start, what to say at the end.
- **Write** — fleshing out the plan, putting in the detail.
- **Check** — reviewing and revising the draft.

These tasks can also be subdivided into smaller tasks.

The simple identification of key activities and the subsequent division into tasks presents you with a more realistic approach to allocating your time.

Be realistic

Time management is the process of allocating tasks to the time periods available. You will need to estimate how much time any one task will demand in order to slot it into an available time period.

However, there are different sorts of activities which demand different sorts of time. You should consider the type of work which needs to be done and the amount of continuous time needed to do it.

For example:

- Writing the first draft of an assignment is best done in a longer time period with short breaks to help concentration, but with few distractions to break continuity.
- Once you have identified specific areas to cover in an assignment, you can allocate shorter periods of time to spend on each area.
- Pre-reading the module notes (i.e. skimming through a unit to see what it covers) can be done in a short period of time.
- The time it takes to read and take notes can vary, depending on the familiarity you have with each topic.

You may also like to think about where you need to be to carry out tasks. While it may be convenient to carry out most of your study at a desk, not every study task needs to occur in a particular environment. If you think that you are going to have 20 minutes spare at the airport, for example, this might be a good time to review the module materials on a laptop or a tablet, or smartphone.

When identifying tasks, you will need to ask:

- What type of task is it?
 - Where do I need to be to carry out this activity effectively?
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Making plans

Plans can be an essential tool in structuring your work and can take many forms. However, plans should be used to help get work done, rather than dominate your work time and should ideally be suited to your working preferences.

The work sheets at the end of this document are suggested formats that might help you with your planning.

Module plans

We also recommend that you make a plan for the whole module. You will note from information given alongside the module materials, the dates by which your assignments have to arrive at WEDC. These dates are important and should form the basis of your module plan. Although WEDC will accept full electronic copies of assignments by the deadline, these need to be closely followed by the originals, along with the Submission Form and Declaration Form that you and your guarantor need to sign. Note that although they are running concurrently, different modules may have different submission dates.

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Sticking to plans

Plans should be as realistic as possible. As your experience of studying grows, you will have a greater understanding of how long each particular task will take.

Where possible, try to complete the tasks on your daily, weekly and module work plans. Avoid letting too much carry over from one day to the next as this creates backlogs that may be difficult to resolve.

Coping with small tasks

Some tasks can appear too trivial to timetable. They can be handled in a variety of ways:

- Some people bunch a few together and put aside some time each week to work through them all. This may be particularly useful when you can sit down for 30 minutes and deal with a whole series of small tasks.
- Other people prefer to tackle them in quick five-minute breaks in larger areas of work. Even though you are taking a break you are still being productive.

Important	Important
Urgent	Non-urgent
Urgent	Non-urgent
Non-important	Non-important

Now apply this to your work plans, tackling urgent and important things first and allocating time ahead for important but non-urgent work. If you make every step of an activity explicit, you will get an overview of all of your commitments and be better able to prioritize these accordingly.

Setting priorities

When you are faced with many different demands on your time it is essential that you are able to prioritize your workload.

There are many different factors affecting individual priorities, including:

- personal motivation/interest;
- forthcoming deadlines;
- confidence with the task/skill; and
- difficulty of the task.

Prioritizing your time involves juggling each of these, relating individual tasks to each other and putting these in the wider focus of all your commitments and responsibilities.

Ask such questions as:

- What is urgent?
- What is routine?
- What can be prepared in advance?

In other words, you need to be aware that:

- some things demand immediate attention;
- some things can be predicted and routinely planned for; and
- some things can be prepared in advance.

It may help to gauge your activities and tasks on a table such as the urgent/ important grid below. Where does each task fit? Is it urgent and important or important but not urgent?

Multiple tasks

You will rarely have the space and time to focus on one particular area of work. You will therefore need to juggle multiple tasks and activities within a constrained timetable.

If you have effectively highlighted all of the tasks demanding your time and planned for each of these, you are less likely to become overwhelmed by the amount of work you need to do.

Motivation

A common barrier to motivation is a lack of certainty or focus. How can you be motivated if you are not clear about what you will be doing?

- A clear focus is important for your motivation, as is some indication of when you will be finishing.
- Take real breaks. Leave your work area completely, have a stroll outside, make a drink. Avoid being drawn into things that you will find difficult to break away from, such as a conversation. Save these for the end of the work period when you can break your concentration completely, and when they can help you to unwind.
- Variety also needs to be introduced so you are not always doing the same activity. Vary the types of task that you are doing. Intersperse small tasks with larger ones. If you can, change an area of work completely to re-stimulate your mind.





Occasionally you may find it hard to be motivated to complete some of the tasks you are asked to undertake: they are just not interesting to you! These may also be tasks, however, that you *have* to handle. Try to set aside some time at the start of a work period to tackle these tasks, rewarding your mind with more interesting work later on.

It can be helpful when planning your work to consider your level of interest in each task. Do you want to spend three hours tackling 'boring' work? Or would a mixture of tasks be more productive, alternating the 'boring' with the 'interesting'?

Completing a task

Try to avoid distraction if possible. When you have settled down to work, acknowledge that this is actual work time. Many potential distractions can be left until later.

If you really find yourself losing interest, reassess your work plan. If you are tackling a task that is particularly tiresome, reward yourself afterwards.

Benefits of planning

Time spent planning your learning will pay off in the end, in two main ways. First, you are more likely to avoid last minute rushes if you have divided work into smaller tasks. This avoids treating an impending assignment as one unmanageable task that you may never feel able to tackle.

Second, taking some time to plan a piece of work will give you a chance to develop an overview of the activity, which is likely to produce an improvement in the quality of your work.

The planning sheets at the end of this document can be used to help plan your working weeks and days. You may find it useful to print them out to use.



Checklist



Try using this time management checklist to help you to organize your learning.

What activities are you involved in?

- Study?
- Spare time?
- Eating, sleeping, shopping?

What tasks are involved?

- Break down the major activities into their constituent parts.

Establish priorities

- What is urgent?
- What can be done over time?
- What is routine?

Relate tasks to time

- What types of tasks are they?
- Do they need continuous time?
- Can they be done during small breaks?
- Where do you need to be to complete the task?

Make work plans

- Plan each week — be prepared, get an overview.
- Plan each day — be active, use checklists.

Stick to these plans

- Make sure they are realistic.
- Try not to develop a backlog.

Get motivated

- Be focused — always know what you want to achieve.

Stay motivated

- Introduce variety — do not slog away at one thing for too long
- Take real breaks but avoid distractions.

Complete tasks

- You will feel better in the end!

Reward productivity

- You have earned it!

