

Introduction

The delivery of courses through distance education is a unique aspect of the IPA's education programmes. Distance education allows students to master a subject and obtain a recognised qualification without having to make the major work and lifestyle changes that a traditional, face-to-face educational programme demands. That said, distance education places its own demands on students, and it is imperative that, from the outset, you appreciate what is required of you if you are to be successful in your chosen area of study.

Mastering your subject through distance education requires the development of specific study and management skills. These include planning, time-management, learning techniques and effective methods of self-assessment. *The most successful distance education students are undoubtedly those who have taken the time to reflect on how they are going to manage their course and improve their study skills.* Having to work alone, even with periodic contact with fellow students and lecturers, is a real challenge; one you should not underestimate. It is, however, a challenge that you can meet. The difficulties you encounter will not be unique and they can all be overcome. Furthermore, the skills that distance education requires will, in and of themselves, be of real benefit to you in all manner of future settings.

This brief guide offers some straightforward advice on managing your distance education course. At various times throughout the year, you should check whether you have incorporated this advice into your learning. While people study and learn in different ways, it is widely accepted that the suggestions advanced here are of real benefit to students, enabling them not only to do well in their particular field but also to really enjoy the distance education method of learning.

First Things

You have received a manual for each subject in your course. You have also received the essential texts that accompany each subject. Don't be frightened by the volume of material! This is your course in one package and will form the basis for your learning for the entire year. The day you receive your manuals and course instructions is essentially the first day of term—your course has begun.

- You should immediately create files to accompany each manual, into which you can place your study notes and any research documents you obtain.
- On your computer, you should create files for each subject in your course. At a later date, you can put your research and assignments into these files.
- Browse through each of the manuals. Don't try to read all the lessons in full, but simply note how they are structured, the main topics that are addressed and the general format of the lessons.
- Browse through the core textbooks.
- Take the time to note when assignments for your various subjects are due.

Whether at work, at college, or at home, we all know that planning is the key to improving results and making our lives easier. Simple "to do" lists help us to organise our days, set priorities, and remember important tasks. As you begin your chosen area of study, make some basic plans for how you intend to proceed. Below are some tips for planning the coming months.

- Decide where you will mainly study (at home, in the library, etc.), taking into account commuting times, where you study best, and any other relevant factors.

- Identify certain crucial periods in the upcoming year. For example, note the dates on which seminars are held, when assignments are due, and periods when you may have extra time for study.
- Decide what you want to achieve in a particular period. For example: “I will have read and completed the activities for chapters 1-6 of each manual by the start of December.” It is advisable to make these achievement-plans as specific as possible.
- Consider what areas of your course that you may need to spend more time on.
- Be realistic. Avoid making plans that you suspect you will not be able to stick to.

Time Management

Distance learning gives you the freedom to learn at a time that suits you. If, however, you do not manage your time, you risk falling behind. The price of being able to learn where and when you want is that you must provide the time-structure for your course. It is crucial that you consider how you are going to organise your time. You may well have a variety of work and personal commitments that demand your attention. Where are you going to find the time to study?

As you begin your course, reflect on how you spend your time over a typical week. This should help you pinpoint certain days and periods that would be suitable for course reading and study. Here are some useful tips for managing your time

Timetables

Drawing up a personal timetable is strongly recommended. Your timetable, which you might consider creating on the calendar of your computer, should:

- Note the days and periods in each week that you will devote to your course.
- Include your other activities and commitments, e.g. family life, sporting activities, etc.
- Be amended as you progress. For example, your study periods should indicate what lesson you intend to focus on or what assignment you are going to research.
- Have some variety. Try to ensure that you are not spending too much time on one area.
- Be altered and revised to meet circumstances. Your timetable is not set in stone and must be updated.

What is of most importance is that you make real use of your timetable. Do not let it simply become a catalogue of good intentions. Instead, use it to maximise your learning opportunities and to create a productive balance between your various commitments.

When do you learn best

When creating your timetable, you should consider when it is that you learn best. You may prefer to study on weekend mornings rather than afternoon, etc. You should also take into account whether certain study times will clash with work or family responsibilities. What you have to identify are times during your week when you are completely free to concentrate on your course. There is time available; it just requires some thought and management to exploit it.

How much time should you devote to study

As you will generally be working on your own, you may become concerned that you are not devoting as much time to your studies as your fellow students. As you progress through your course, attend seminars, and meet with your subject co-ordinators and fellow-students, you will be able to gauge whether you need to spend more time on a particular subject. At the outset, however, you should certainly have a rough goal as to how many hours you are going to spend working on your

course. For example, you might decide to have three two-hour study sessions during the week and two three-hour sessions at the weekend. If you find that you are frequently short of your goal, reflect on why this is so and take the appropriate steps to rectify the matter.

Learning Techniques

Once you have created the structures to manage your learning, you must consider how best to make use of your valuable time. People learn in different ways, and many of the techniques that you have used in school, college, or work will be applicable here. You may very well know the way of studying that suits you best. However, it is useful at this stage to give some thought to studying productively. Below are some tips for making the most of your study periods.

Location

Where will you study best? If it is at a library, consider the time it will take to get you there. If you intend to study in the office after work, consider whether you will be interrupted by colleagues and phone calls. Many distance education students choose to study at home. If you decide to do this, you should: (1) create a suitable learning environment where you can keep your books and notes, (2) make sure that your family and friends agree not to disturb you, (3) foster the self-discipline to ignore the distractions around you.

Reading

Your course involves a significant amount of reading. Apart from the manuals, you have received the essential text books. These have been carefully chosen to fit the objectives of your course. You have also been given lists of recommended books and articles. Given all this material, it is important that you read effectively. You should avoid a casual approach to reading, opting instead to engage with the material in a methodical and structured fashion and ensuring that you have fully understood the central points. This is often called “active” reading. You will also have to make sensible decisions about which texts to read closely and which to “skim-” read. Your decision here should be based on the relevance and value of the material to what you are studying. Obviously, the core textbooks should be read closely, but you should feel free to consult other books and articles.

Taking notes

Since you will generally not be attending lectures, it might seem strange to be advised to take notes. However, one of the mistakes that a distance education student can make is to think that because much of the material has been given to them in the form of books and manuals they do not have to do anything other than read through what has been provided. As before, what you have to do is actively engage with the material in to ensure that you have understood it. The best way to do this is to take notes.

People take notes in different ways. The key is to ensure that your approach is helping you learn and analyse the material in the most time-efficient manner. Your notes should always be legible, clearly indicate the topic or problem they are concerned with, and have a simple structure. Taking messy, disorganised notes is simply a waste of your study time. Here are some basic tips on note-taking:

- Avoid taking notes that are almost as long as the original material or so short as to be confusing.
- Note the central point of a lesson, the main arguments that have been advanced, and how the lesson fits into the overall objective of the course.

- Highlight the most salient points.
- Make a distinction between ideas that you have had and those taken from elsewhere.
- Read through your notes to check if they make sense, whether they need further comments to, and what materials you might need to consult for clarification and further explanation.
- Write a short summary of your notes, thereby creating a useful study sheet that will be of real help when you come to revise

Self-Assessment

Before you take your examinations, you will have been assessed by written assignments (see the student guide for advice on writing and submitting assignments). However, at various junctures, you should give yourself some brief tests to measure how you are performing. Once a week, say, you might give yourself an hour-long test on what you have learnt over the course of that week. Most of the lessons in your course manuals have suggested activities at the end. These are there to allow you to quickly check whether you have assimilated all the information and are designed to prompt you to reflect further on the topics covered. Your text books also contain a variety of tests and exercises. These should be central elements of your study.

Using past exam papers is also a convenient way of self-assessment. At the end of a certain study periods, devote some time to a past exam question, quickly checking if you can note some of the main points that it deals with. It is advisable to do this as early as possible, as it will enable you to become familiar with the type of question that you are likely to be asked and to focus your mind on the most important areas of your course.

Conclusions

Your experience of learning through distance education will depend on how much effort you put into planning and managing the process. The very straightforward tips outlined in this booklet should help you to make some decisions as to how you are going to proceed. Remember, taking the time at the outset to make some study plans and to reflect on how you study best will greatly enhance your enjoyment of your chosen course and will counter any stress you may experience at the initial stages. Making such strategic choices will let you remain in control and fully exploit the opportunities that distance education affords.